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The background of the book cover is a detailed, dark brown illustration. On the left side, there is a multi-story building with many windows and a balcony. The right side and the foreground are filled with dense, leafy trees and bushes. The overall style is that of a classic book cover illustration.

THE STAIRWAY ON THE WALL

BY
AUGUSTA
PRESCOTT



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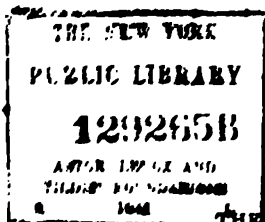
THE STAIRWAY ON THE WALL

BY
AUGUSTA PRESCOTT

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TO THE FRIEND

*Who so faithfully and tirelessly
accompanies me on my mental adventures*

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THE STAIRWAY ON THE WALL

THE STAIRWAY ON THE WALL

CHAPTER I

I PLAY THE DETECTIVE

IT takes the pre-natal influence of jealousy to make a good detective; I am from Beverly, Mass., and no germ of suspicion was floating in the atmosphere at the time when it would have been of service to me. And that is why I stood so listlessly in Lady Hensington's upper rear drawing-room guarding the wedding presents; I knew no one would take them.

Circumstance—not my will—had brought me here; circumstance coupled with the thought that I might have another chance of seeing—her!

Nominally I was there to watch that no one departing took anything that should not have been personally conducted from the house. Actually, down deep in my heart, I knew that I was simply hoping to catch a glimpse of the girl who had come into my life quite dramatically and unexpectedly ten days before.

She had arrived with the swiftness and directness of an arrow. One moment I had been care free and tranquil, heart whole and happy, a bachelor at thirty-three. The next instant and Cupid let fly an arrow from his bow that changed the whole beating of my

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heart. I was the victim of that astigmatism of the mind's eye known as Love at First Sight.

Yet I was only the detective employed to watch the wedding presents; while she was a member of the British aristocracy and her family name was blazoned forth in *Burke*.

But to go back to the wedding presents; there were three great shelves of precious stones—for Lady Hensington's guests were not among the "poor but honest" class; and there were chests and coffer of silver and plate.

But my special mission, the object for which I had been placed in this position of responsibility, was to guard one great jewel—the Hepworth diamond. It was a pure white stone of, I don't know how many carats; and its value was so great that Lady Hensington had not been able to obtain an insurance upon it.

I looked carelessly at the Hepworth—for frankly it did not interest me greatly—and I wondered at its value. There it lay in its box of blue velvet sparkling like the sun; even among the other jewels it shone like a comet of light placed among bodies of lesser magnitude. And, though I took no keen delight in it, I could not help observing that it was a very wonderful stone indeed; deep, with countless facets, each one catching and throwing back the colors that came within the radius of its darting fire; violet, indigo, blue, green, yellow, orange and red—my head grew dizzy watching it.

Lady Hensington, when she put me at this post of honor, told me never for one instant to take my eyes off it.

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"Most of my daughter's dower is tied up in that stone," she had cautioned me, "and I bought it for her only because half the crowned heads in Europe were bidding on it; don't let your eyes leave it for one minute to-night."

"But if I watch it all the evening I shall be stone blind," I had replied.

"Never mind," was Lady Hensington's retort, "watch it for your life!"

Incidentally, I had as an assistant a man from Scotland Yard, who stood in the doorway. His duty was to keep the low class crooks from getting in; mine to keep the high class ones from taking things and getting out.

The hour was eight, a most unusual time for an English wedding. But it seems that the Italian Marquis had balked at the settlements at the last moment; and it had taken us from High Noon until now to get things arranged to his satisfaction. Meanwhile the bride—poor hysterical victim—wept in her veil; while Lady Hensington, her mother, and I, her lawyer, signed over another million to the Italian Chambreys present and to come.

Lady Hensington was a Boston woman who had married a tarnished English title twenty years before. Fortunately for her, Lord Hensington had died on his wedding journey. And now, after a score of rather precarious years in English society, Lady Hensington had secured an Italian title for her only child. It was not much of a title and it came high, but Lady Hensington felt that she must have it. Henceforth it would be, "My daughter, the Marquise de Cham-

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brey!" And she had brought me, her family lawyer, over from America, to help with the settlements.

"He's got everything now except the dove-cote on the Staten Island farm," I grumbled to Lady Hensington as I sealed and settled the papers.

"Hush—h! He doesn't know about it," whispered she, with a timid glance over her shoulder to where his lawyers sat, glutted with the spoils. Then, with a victorious smile, as of one who had done a royal duty by her only daughter, she swept to the drawing-room to welcome the guests, who, having gone away unsatisfied at High Noon, were now returning to offer congratulations and to partake of the wedding baked meats.

At this stage in the wedding function I brightened up, for the first time, for I knew that now the moment was approaching when I would have my chance of seeing—her! What was the Hepworth diamond, however dazzling, compared to a sight of her.

I use the word seeing, for I did not at that time have a speaking acquaintance with the Honorable Florentine Hadley. Perhaps I had not even coveted one, for I was in that frame of mind when—had I been presented to her by some grace of God or good will of man—I might have stood in front of her mute; not dead, but very speechless. For I was suffering not only from Love at First Sight, but from the paralysis of the faculties that goes with it.

As I stood there watching those over-dressed, over-fed, over-rich persons—banal all!—come and go, I forgot the diamond and I became conscious of a Presence and then of a Voice. It was just back of my

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shoulder. And that it was the voice of her for whom I had been waiting all the evening I knew without turning my head. But though living all this day for this moment, anticipating it, praying and hoping for it, I was scarcely prepared for the words she spoke:

"Please introduce him, Charley; I specially wish to know him."

Charley's reply, uttered in the chesty raspiness of a much moneyed and over indulged man of forty, flabbergasted me.

"But it is out of the question, Florentine. He is as poor as a hack-horse; poorer than a church mouse; and—besides——"

"Besides what?"

"He's here as a hired man. He is a detective employed to watch the million pounds in wedding presents, and the Hepworth diamond, Lady Hensington's present to the bride. She told me so just now. She said she hired him to stand right there all the evening and guard it. I'll venture though, she is paying the poor devil little enough besides his supper, at that."

Confound Lady Hensington! To take advantage of me in that way in order to impress the evil but opulent Sir Charles with an idea of her wealth! And confound my accommodating disposition for bringing me here. But I had learned one thing: namely, that the man with *her* was her cousin, Sir Charles Hadley, "Sepoy Hadley" I had heard him called when I was introduced to him. And that cousin or no cousin he had a reputation for doing the most unscrupulous things in the financial world of any in England.

The rasping voice of Sir Charles went on;

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"He's one of those fellows who would knock you down with a bludgeon, or throttle you, or—or commit hari-kari, or whatever else you want him to do if—if you pay him enough money for it,—don't you know!"

"Tell me some more!" came breathlessly from the girl.

Despite the thud made by my heart, as it settled in my pumps, I could catch every cadence of her voice, and it vaguely seemed to me that she was not as shocked as I supposed she would be.

"More," growled Sir Charles. "Why, for a guinea he'd squeeze the neck of anybody at this wedding. He is one of the bloodiest men in his profession. But he's so hard up he's more to be pitied than blamed, I suppose," he added magnanimously.

I pinched my fingers to still the itching in them. As I thought of the neck of Sir Charles, it would not have cost a guinea!

Yet I knew at that crucial time, with those two people standing behind me—one the dearest in all the world to me, and the other rapidly becoming the hate-fulest—I knew that my ridiculous position at the present moment was all my own fault. I need not have been there as a detective. I had voluntarily fore-ordained myself to be the victim, the lamb, the Isaac now being sacrificed upon the altar of Lady Hensington's ambitions and gradually roasted by slow torture without anesthesia, under the very eyes of his lady love. I learned in that painful few seconds that the color of burning fagots is deep blue, zig-zagged with streaks of Lucifer.

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"He's nothing but a thug," affirmed Sir Charles.

But the girl's reply changed the whole color scheme:

"He doesn't look it," she objected. "But, oh, I hope that it is true; he will do what I want him to do."

What she wanted me to do!

There was a soft thumping as though she were clapping her little gloved hands together, but her voice had a curious note in it; a stricture of suspense or fear seemed gripping her throat. If I had been a student of psychology I would have said she was a girl grasping at a straw.

"I wanted to know him before, but now I really must! Introduce him, Charley, and if he is half as desperate as you say he is, I am sure he is just the person I need."

I listened with a new and surprised emotion. There was a cautious lilt in my heart of which I was half ashamed.

The significance of her remark escaped Sir Charles or he ignored it.

"But I tell you, Florentine, the beggar is penniless," remonstrated he. "Why, I'll bet there's a silver watch on the end of his fob this minute."

I'd like to have taken up that bet. My watch is solid gold and it was willed to me by my grandfather Elliott, who left me half his fortune on condition that I carry his timepiece. I trust I'm not mercenary, but half a million in the United States is worth half a million anywhere. It is as big as a sauce plate and a little thicker. Moreover, there is so much of the too solid element about it that I cannot carry it on a fob.

"I don't care if he doesn't carry any watch on his

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fob at all," the girl declared prophetically. "He looks as though he would do me a favor, and kind hearts are more than coronets, Sir Charles!"

"Kind!" sneered Sir Charles, he of the trampled coronet. "He might as well look kind, since it can't lead him into any extravagance, seeing he's got nothing to give away. If I were Lady Hensington I wouldn't trust him with a farthing, let alone the Hepworth."

The conversation, aside from its personal qualities, was too amazing to be dismissed. Two thoughts were uppermost. Why was Sir Charles Hadley so determined to vilify me? And why should his beautiful cousin so decidedly take my part?

"For shame, Charley," exclaimed the girl. "I saw him pick up that poor little grey dog, the dog you ran over last week."

So, it was Sir Charles who had run over a dog and cracked the little wretch's forelegs and left him howling in front of my door. The scamp was able to limp out to-night and lick up my terrapin stew while I was changing ties for the third time. Well, "Grey" won't have to steal his terrapin hereafter; I'll put it on the floor for him.

"There isn't a tuppence in picking up stray dogs," Sir Charles' snarling voice went on. "But since you're bound to know him I'll indulge your taste for low companions this time. There's American blood in you on your mother's side, surely. I'll introduce him; but remember what I say—there's nothing good ever comes of knowing penniless persons."

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"Is he poorer than I am?" asked the girl with a hard note in her voice.

"You are supposed to be an heiress," sneered Sir Charles, "and you might roll in money if——"

"There's no need of talking about it," interrupted she, "I've told you——"

"But it isn't a matter of choice with you, it is necessity. You are in a desperate position," argued he in a tone that must have gone through her like a coarse saw. "It is family pride, honor—your honor and mine—and it's money."

"Don't," cried the Honorable Florentine in a voice so pitiful that it would have melted any human heart except that of Sepoy Hadley.

"Come," she added, changing the subject with a self-control that was admirable, "you promised to present—him."

"Oh," sneered the Baronet. "He can't help you—unless," he added as a malicious after thought, "unless you can get him to steal the Hepworth for you—you're good at driving men desperate."

"You are too cruel—unjust——"

"It will be taken before the night is over; no big wedding ever passed off safely with a diamond like that lying there in easy reach. Somebody's going to steal it and it might as well be——"

"I have always suspected you of being a devil—now I can believe it——"

The voice was restrained, but there was a bitterness in it that spoke even more than the words.

Sir Charles laughed—cackled—would be a better word.

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"Somebody else would get the credit for it and, after awhile, you could break it up and sell it, or you could re-cut it into a pear——"

"Stop," wailed the girl, "or you will drive me——"

"Then why don't you hurry up and do——"

"What?"

"The thing you've got to do—and you've got to do it soon—before to-morrow night."

His tone had sunk to a hiss; I'd read of the human hiss but never did I hear it before.

Her speech was very low but there was a new—a half-frightened—reverberation as she answered:

"I'll do it—I promise."

"I believe you're lying!"

"Take care!"

The girl's voice had a threatening cry.

"If you don't I wash my hands of you," uttered Sir Charles thickly. "And to-morrow all London will ring with a sensational account of the Honorable Miss Hadley——"

They had moved out of ear-shot.

Ethically I ought to have been ashamed of having listened; in reality I knew that I could not have torn myself out of range of hearing if I had gripped a whirring world. I was held there motionless by a magnetic current of incalculable power and I could not have moved. The woman and I were coming into the same psychic zone and our lives were drawing together with the certainty of an inexorable fate. I had to hear.

The rustle of her gown died away behind me and I knew it wouldn't take more than one full minute for

I PLAY THE DETECTIVE

them to cross the room, turn, come back, and stand in front of me. I closed my eyes and counted. I knew they had started and I didn't need a curved lens to tell me just where they were; nor did I need eyes to show me how she would look. I knew that there was approaching me the handsomest girl in the whole world. This is a conservative estimate as I haven't visited Mars; and I had learned from Lady Hensington that she was the richest and most elegant young woman in England.

I remembered dizzily now to have heard something ugly concerning her fortune, but this was no time to think of that. The supreme fact was that there was coming toward me—making a bee line for me—the young woman with whom I was madly in love—the girl for whom I believed I had been preserved ever since I was born.

I did not know then that she was the girl destined to bring pride and joy into my life; pain and misunderstanding; tragedy and passion, and all the other things that transport us from Heaven to earth and back to Heaven again.

I only realized that as my eyes opened again my gaze was on the big diamond with a fortune chiseled into its faceted depths; but my heart had left me for the beautiful woman who wanted to know me so that she could ask a favor of me.

I might have been a fool, but a man isn't a man until he has a fool's diploma.

CHAPTER II

THE HEPWORTH DIAMOND

I CLOSED my eyes again and listened. The rustling silver gown was very near and I caught the lily perfume which I always associated with her. Do angels carry harps or is it lilies? The genial voice of Sir Charles made me open my eyes.

"Ah, asleep at your post?"

"No—o," I stammered, blinking and trying to keep my eyes in hand so to speak. "I'm awake, wide awake."

"Well, you don't look it," replied the cheery one, "and for a penny I'd wager that you were snoozing. Come, shake yourself. I want to introduce you to my cousin, the Honorable Florentine Hadley, Mr.—er—what's your name?"

"Elliott, Roman Elliott," I said, holding out my hand to him merely so that I could have an excuse for passing it along to her.

He shook it with his *left* hand. He *had* to!

"Elliott! Oh, yes, to be sure. I ought to have remembered. I had an old skate once, named Elliott. Wasn't worth a farthing; laid down every fifteen minutes. But I held on to him and sold him after a while for a pound."

The ill-featured rascal fairly beamed on me at the pleasant recollection before he performed the introduction:

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"Florentine, this is Mr. Elliott of—nowhere, I guess. It's cheapest living there; you asked me to introduce him."

I bowed, but did not lift my eyes to Florentine's face.

Sir Charles turned away and I saw him looking at the wedding presents. He stood very close, and if I had been of a suspicious nature I would have said that he was in front of them a remarkably long time. I thought of it afterwards—so often.

Sir Charles, having inspected the gifts, turned abruptly to Florentine, "Well, I'll leave you to talk to him. Don't let him borrow anything of you. Good-bye; and here's your fan, Florentine."

So this was Sir Charles Hadley, the English baronet of whose eccentricities I had heard! And it was in this fashion and after this manner—partly in asides and partly in coarse jest—he had introduced me to his cousin. The whole thing savored of the grotesque!

He made an odd bow as if to move away. But, as he handed her the fan, I saw his hand. *I saw his hand!* He had unwrapped it for an instant and, as he caught my eyes fixed upon it, his face flared up as with a purple douche. But I had seen it.

He moved again to the jewels; I knew he was in front of the Hepworth diamond, for its fire flashed away from me for an instant; at the same time he fuddled the wrapping of his hand. It was an odd man-œuvre, for he turned to me hastily to know if I had seen him; my eyes were upon him, and, if he could have stabbed me with a look, I would have fallen pierced to the heart. His purple deepened to conges-

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tion; he made another move toward the Hepworth, then stopped as though arrested by my eye. He had intended to examine the diamond again, but changed his purpose.

"I will see you downstairs," he muttered to her.

And so he introduced us and left us, the Honorable Florentine embarrassed almost to the point of tears! And I, distressed; not at the wretch's rudeness, but that she should be so distressed!

She recovered herself first as is the way of women in embarrassing situations.

"I asked my cousin to introduce you," she apologized. "But I didn't suppose he would be so ungentlemanly—so rude as——" In the next breath the dear girl began to excuse him: "He has been away from England so long—among the Sepoys—and elsewhere—that he is so—so—so——"

"So delightfully considerate as to betake himself away!" I broke in.

At this she laughed and I laughed, too. If she had cried; if she had cried! The laugh broke the ice as laughs will. My cousin Irene and I once laughed so hard, skating the double grapevine twist, that we both went through the ice on her mother's artificial lake. I stood on the deck of a toy boat that had capsized during the summer and pulled Irene out.

If the Lady Florentine were to fall into any trouble of any kind, what would I not do to get her back! But that was a look ahead; at present I was in a kind of bliss that fairly cloyed my senses with its sweetness.

THE HEPWORTH DIAMOND

"I asked Cousin Charles to introduce you because—because I wanted to speak to you."

"A very clever way to bring it about," I agreed delightedly.

"I mean about something special. Could you—do you think you could spare the time—to talk to me a little while?"

Could I spare the *what*? Hadn't I been sparing fourteen hours out of my waking sixteen for the last ten days to talk to her in my imagination? And wasn't I dreaming of her the whole eight hours of my sleeping night? Could I spare the time to talk to her about something special? Well, I guess, yes! as we used to say at Cambridge.

Her next speech acquitted the question of its idiocy. *Could I spare the time!*

"I didn't suppose Lady Hensington would allow you to leave just now on account of the diamond."

"It is of no account," I replied boldly. I glanced at the Hepworth as I spoke; there it reposed in its blue velvet nest, sending forth whole planets of light.

"You cannot leave now," she went on, "and I must wait."

"No, no," I said hastily, for I knew in my heart that it would have taken several Lady Hensingtons to detain me. "I—I'll ask her," faltered I, with a spiteful glance at the Hepworth.

"I wouldn't want you to lose your position for me," said the Honorable Florentine.

"I wouldn't want to; it wouldn't be right for me," lied I. "But if you'll excuse me a moment I think I can arrange matters with Lady Hensington."

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"What about the wedding presents?" asked she as her beautiful eyes rested upon a turquoise set that just matched them in color, "and the Hepworth diamond?"

I had already half forgotten the stupid things and refused to look at them again. There they were ranged in triple rows on three shelves with a triple display of incandescents glowing malignantly down upon them.

"I think they are safe," I said; "I am sure that light is brilliant enough to X-ray the brain of any one who thought of taking them."

"Oh, please—please—don't leave them alone," begged the Honorable Florentine. "What would you do if anything should happen to them? And we have all heard so much about them. They are the talk of London."

"Buy something a thousand times as fine," was on the tip of my foolish tongue. "I'll go and get a nurse-maid to take care of them," I muttered savagely between my teeth. I looked at her for approval, but her thoughts were away and she didn't hear me. Then, in my best voice I said: "They will be safe until I can send some one to take my place."

In her big jeweled eyes there came a glad light, bright enough to lighten the spot in my heart made gloomy by the thought that I was deceiving her, and she smiled. Truly all is fair in love and poverty, I reflected; and as for diamonds, who could think of them with those bright eyes shining so near.

"Then ask Lady Hensington's permission to accompany me a little way in my carriage—here she is—and

THE HEPWORTH DIAMOND

I may want you to go—perhaps—a considerable distance; please ask her now!"

I followed the direction of Florentine's eyes. Sure enough, there was Lady Hensington. Impelled by the delight of having so much wealth to display she had left the drawing-room and had come to enjoy the jewels.

"She is with my cousin, Sir Charles," observed the Honorable Miss Hadley, in some surprise, shrinking back a little as she spoke.

I looked again and truly there by Lady Hensington's side was Sir Charles Hadley. Lady Hensington was talking volubly and Sir Charles was listening with what was intended to be polite attention.

"This," said Lady Hensington, picking up the blue velvet box, "is the Hepworth!" She held it for an instant with the pride of a woman who has half a million in the hollow of her hand; and then she held it out to Sir Charles.

In some way, passing from hand to hand, the box slipped and fell. Lady Hensington cried out in dismay, but Sir Charles picked it up and restored it.

"Very unwise of you, Lady Hensington," I heard him say, and then they passed on. An instant later Sir Charles came back—apparently at Lady Hensington's request—and rearranged the diamond. It took him a long time and again he fuddled the linen bandage on his hand. He lifted the velvet box, turned it, laid the diamond this way and that; and more than once stepped back to inspect it; Lady Hensington from the distant doorway watched him approvingly. At length the diamond was placed in its velvet bed.

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The Honorable Miss Hadley and I, half sheltered behind a palm, were interested spectators of it all; as Sir Charles bent there over the diamond her hands went shut in a grip which tightened to a clinch; as he lingered her fingers closed upon her fan, and rib by rib, its delicate frame work snapped in her agonized grasp.

"There—he is gone," I uttered; for, stranger though I was, it was useless to pretend that I did not notice her agitation.

"You will find me in the carriage," she whispered furtively, "my chaperon was taken ill and went home, so I am alone. Wait in the vestibule. When my number is called, go down and get it. You will find me there looking for you. And if you can—Mr.—Elliott—please keep Sir Charles from seeing us go away together."

For reply I squeezed her hand gently. Perhaps I added a little emphasis to the finger squeeze—because I knew Sir Charles couldn't, *with his hand!*

She melted away upstairs in search of her wraps and I stood watching until the last fold of her silver train had swept out of sight.

I took a farewell look at the Hepworth; it was there, saucerlike in its myriad cuttings—each lighted facet reflecting and magnifying its size a thousand fold. But, by some freak of fancy, or trick of the imagination, it seemed less beautiful to me. No longer did it lie proudly on top of its velvet bed, its outlines more suggested than concealed by the caressing folds; but rather it looked as though it had snuggled underneath its covering, and, like an indis-

THE HEPWORTH DIAMOND

posed beauty, sick of the glare, had crept to repose with its drapery drawn tightly around it.

The Hepworth was certainly half hidden in the velvet. I stepped over to lift it and lay it on top when I remembered my orders that on no account was I to touch it. To think that it lay dull and sulky in its box was, of course, a freak of my vision.

What I did was to go to the front door and tell the Scotland Yard man to go in and watch the wedding presents. I might have been a chump—and probably was—but I didn't mention the Hepworth to him for fear of aweing him. Then I called up a relief man to take his place at the door. He was glad to change places with me, though I was sorry enough afterwards that I had not left the old man at the post.

My next job was to look up Sir Charles. I did not have far to search for he stood right at the door, apparently watching for some one to depart, and on his roughened, furrowed face there was a look, partly of brutality and partly of anxiety.

I had a chance to observe his right hand, which was done up in a silk handkerchief, heavily embroidered and monogrammed in some strange Indian work; and, as my gaze wandered back to his face, I thought that never had I seen a skin so fissured by life in the tropics nor an expression so rent by evil emotions. I despised him, yet I must play a part; and the part now was to get him away from the front door. Forgetting my temporary position there as a menial, I touched him genially on the shoulder.

"Come, Sir Charles!" I exclaimed, "and have a cigar with me; there are matters——"

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"I'm not smoking," he interrupted.

"Then let me show you the diamonds; you're interested in stones, Lady Hensington tells me; and there are gems there worth their thousands."

Sir Charles gave me a startled side glance. Did he guess that I was talking against hope to get him away from the front door?

"There's one stone there, the Hepworth—I'd like to have you see it again. It's the most valuable gem in London; why, if it were stolen, all Scotland Yard——"

"Scotland Yard!" he cried, throwing my hand off his shoulder. "What for God's sake—do you mean? I'll go with you," he finally uttered thickly; "I'll go, but it is there; you can see it for yourself——"

Scarcely conscious of our steps we wended our way back to the little reception room where the Hepworth lay, queen of its brilliant circle.

"Look!" he ejaculated.

"What is the matter with it?" I exclaimed. "The lights are playing a trick upon it."

I looked wonderingly, for it seemed to me it sent forth no flash. Like a court beauty that has been the pet of kings, it languished all dull and disdainful in the presence of doubting mortals; and though I looked at it again, I could catch no answering gleam;—it was as lifeless as though it were a thing from which the spark has fled.

"I must be blind," I confessed. "But why are you so agitated?"

Sir Charles was mopping his face and studying me intently. He seemed to see his mistake, for he recov-

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ered his self-possession with a rapidity that was marvelous.

The Scotland Yard man whom I had put at the post, stood guard in front of the jeweled display.

"He's in your place, I see," observed Sir Charles, now almost fully restored.

"Yes, I have another matter of more importance," I foolishly said.

Sir Charles lifted his shoulders.

A girl in a gold colored gown flitted past us, bestowing a telling glance upon the baronet. His eyes followed her; he lost his look of apprehension, for he was mere man after all, and a grin spread over his cardinal features; the girl passed on alone into the conservatory, sending a glance back at us out of the tail of her eye. Sir Charles saw, and it was evident that the eternal feminine interested him; but there was something else in his system to be digested first. I am no coward, but, as he leered at me, I almost wished that he did not hate me; it was a look as of the Devil; and I felt as powerless to fathom the depths of its evil as though I had gazed at Mephisto, himself.

"Where did you leave Florentine?" he asked with a chuckle out of which the fear had partly gone. "I hope she didn't find out that you're the richest American in London to-night."

I ground my teeth at his nerve.

"Then you knew that I wasn't paid by the hour to watch those damned wedding presents?"

The grin deepened to a leer. "Yes, I knew. Lady Hensington told me; and she said you had cautioned

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her against the thousand pound investment which she was to have put into my Sepoys to-day."

Well, he had tried to get even with me; yet, as far as I knew, he had been playing right into my hand, and ignorance is temporary bliss.

"Where's Florentine?" he repeated.

"Dancing," I replied as the distant strains of waltz music came drifting into the reception room.

"Then I suppose I might as well go and look up the little heiress that's waiting for me, in the conservatory. Tell me," whispered Sir Charles, getting so close to me that the temptation to run my fist down his throat was almost overpowering, "Did you see that little girl all dressed in a gold colored frock—a little bit low—here—eh—lower than Florentine's gown even—and—eh?"

He was, I saw at once, a man for whom there are but two things in the world, love and money—any kind of love and any kind of money.

I heard the rustle of Florentine's shimmering silver frock upon the stairs or there's no telling what might have happened to Sir Charles. As it was, I saw her on the landing half hidden by a palm, where she waited, until she saw me lead, or pull Sir Charles away. I saw him headed for the conservatory to search for the girl in the gold colored frock, then I glanced up at Florentine; she gave me a long sweet look of approval and I walked through the hall and out into the vestibule to wait for her.

Was I doing right in leaving my post?

I was not. I confess it openly. But I hope for kindness, even as I would extend it to a man in my posi-

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tion. I was in love; the girl was in distress—persecuted, perhaps; and she had appealed to me!

I had come to the wedding of my client as a lawyer; she had suddenly asked me to turn detective; I had only partially consented.

I do not always say of myself that I have done those things I ought not to have done; and have left undone those things I ought to have done! No man can make habitually such an accusation against himself with sincerity.

But on this occasion I did leave undone the thing I ought to have done! I did not stay to watch the diamond.

But if retribution follows such acts as mine, then I must lay to retributive justice the hours that followed.

Back in the States there was my Cousin Irene with whom I had once considered myself much in love; Irene, strict, uncompromising, exact; Irene who, on account of duty to ideals, would not marry. And there was Uncle Jason, bluff, kind-hearted and true, who never slighted a task.

But here, before me, was this bright, beautiful girl beckoning, and, with only a slight qualm of conscience, I deserted my place and followed her.

CHAPTER III

TO-MORROW NIGHT AT NINE

I SHIVERED in the vestibule, for the draught sent the rain in. Yet I was warm, for I was waiting for my lady.

All thoughts of the wedding presents had vanished, and with the vanishing of thoughts went the last vestige of responsibility. I don't attempt to excuse it, for I was a man in love, trusting, happy—and confident. She was a stranger to me, but Cupid leaps the bars of time.

The Hepworth was now as far away from me as gems I might have worn in a previous existence; if any flash of it came back, it bore the crimson hue of rebellion. Lady Hensington had placed me there without warning; I had told her I didn't know a diamond from a charcoal; and, then, had come the Girl into my life! With me it had been the Lady or the Diamond; and I gladly broke my tryst with the gem to keep it with the girl. It was the gleam of a diamond versus the glory of a girl's smile; and the girl's smile won.

But why did she not come? The door opened again. Ah, it was she at last. She tripped down the steps, for her number had been called and the footman was putting her in. The carriage moved leisurely along and I had time to slip down and overtake it. The

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horses were walking, for the street was jammed with vehicles; so without halting the driver, I opened the carriage door and stepped in.

If miracles had not gone out of fashion I should say that one had happened—and to me. I seated myself beside her; and she pulled aside her satin cloak to give me room.

“Drive to Lady Faith’s,” was the order she had given the footman, as he closed the door. “Aunt Faith lives a long distance away, quite the other end of London. But I thought it would give us all the better opportunity to talk,” she explained, when we had cleared the crowd.

She settled herself as she spoke, in her corner of the brougham, while I tried to turn so that I could see her. It seemed so marvelous that I should be sitting so close to her that again I had the utmost difficulty in believing myself awake. The night had turned cool in the late London twilight and there was a soft English drizzle falling. I lifted the linen robe and tucked it around her.

“Oh, I shall not need it,” she laughed. “I came prepared for a drive. I have my cloak, as you see, and, for fear it would be chilly, I brought this little fur wrap and a feather boa.”

She threw the fur cape around her shoulders as she spoke and her head bent so near to mine that she almost touched me. For the first time I had a chance to observe her closely.

I had seen many picture women in my life but none that approached the Honorable Florentine Hadley in any way, for her beauty was of the style that is clas-

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sic without severity. She had the sweet expression of the Venus de Milo; and, with her arms lost in her cape, she was just as graceful. Like the Queen of Sheba, she could stand the test of much adorning; yet to my infatuated eyes she looked best as the armless Milo, appealing to you in a lovely, helpless pathos.

Few women, outside the marbles of the Louvre, would have dared to wear their hair plainly parted and smoothly rolled at the sides. Fewer still would have ventured on a simple loose twist at the back of the neck; a silver coil of hair without comb or ornament. Her loveliness was of the fair artistic type with not a flaw to mar it from her perfect forehead to her faultlessly curved chin. Many times during my brief stay in London I had heard her described as the reigning beauty and I had seen her portrait at all the exhibitions. But I had to confess that the best of them did her scant justice. She was ideal even at close range.

I was so busily engaged studying her face that I had not noticed that she in turn was studying mine.

"I was not mistaken," she said with a sigh of relief, after a long searching look. "I knew I would find you all I wanted you to be. And, now, that we have stared at each other long enough, we can begin our conversation."

"I beg your pardon," I hastened to say.

"And I beg yours," she returned with a smile. "Now we are even. But I wanted to know you well; and I am glad you stared at me because I want you to know me. It will be easier for me, knowing your position—and that I can pay you—if you had

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been rich I should not have dared—to do what I am going to do!”

I made no reply to this; but if the Honorable Miss Florentine thought that she was going to pay me for my services she was mistaken. I wanted to assure her of this but prudence prompted me to wait. As for the rest of it—well, never mind—I had my surprise coming!

I looked at her. She returned my gaze with a slow, lovely smile which the carriage lamps threw toward me like sunshine coming out of shadow. Yet for some reason she hesitated to speak.

“I hardly know how to begin,” said she, “I wish I could think of a proper way to say what I want to say to you.”

“Begin any way,” I said, “and I shall understand.”

“I hope so,” she begged anxiously. “But if I could only be sure of it, perfectly sure.”

“You can be positive,” I declared; and I wanted to add that I could tell her that which would make it seem more sure, that I thought I loved her well enough to understand her now and always, but again prudence cautioned me to keep quiet.

She stirred her cloak and the bruised lilies threw a perfume across her face.

“If I could only be certain of it,” she began again.

Her cheeks flushed so painfully that I felt some assurance on my part was necessary. “Suppose you begin,” I suggested; “and before you have gone very far I may be able to convince you that I do understand and sympathize, no matter what it is you have to say.”

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I glanced once more at her face. We were sitting side by side in a closed carriage into which the light merely sifted at best; but even in the dark I could have said that she was losing color; her cheeks looked as pale as the lilies that peeped from out her cloak. My soul ached for her but I knew she must proceed in her own way. That is the advantage of being thirty-three and experienced. If I were only twenty—

"How old do you think I am?" she asked, interrupting my thought.

"I was just saying to myself that you might be twenty——"

"I am twenty-one. That is I shall be twenty-one to-morrow. To-morrow night at nine o'clock!"

"Nine o'clock?" I exclaimed as though that were the important part of the communication.

"Yes!" And here Lady Florentine hesitated. "And that is just what I brought you out here to talk about."

"I'll talk about it until to-morrow night at nine," I said promptly.

Fortunately for me, perhaps, her lovely ladyship did not catch my remark.

"I wanted to talk to you about it because—because —because by to-morrow night at nine—by to-morrow night at nine—"

She stopped short.

"You were saying that by to-morrow night at nine?" I repeated, questioningly.

"By to-morrow night at nine, I've—I've got to be married!"

She turned in the brougham and looked me full in

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the face. Over the top of her silver fox cape her eyes shone like blue stars. "I'm going to be married by to-morrow night at nine."

I had lived some time before, and I've lived some time since, but I am free to confess that never in all my life have I suffered such a moment of utter collapse. So it was for this that she wanted me, to tell me that she was going to be married. Perhaps she had brought me to consult about the settlements. Or—sudden and horrid thought—to ask me to stand guard as detective over her wedding presents. If she should ask me to be a detective at her wedding—if she should!

"You don't say anything," she faltered. "I thought you'd try to help me a little, to make it easier for me."

A tear shone in her eyes and, in good Harvard language, it broke me all up. I leaned toward her; if I had dared I would have put my arm around her.

"Do let me help you," I exclaimed. "Only tell me how I can help you!"

She wiped the tear away. Gladly would I have done it for her. I choked a little and the atmosphere of the brougham grew unaccountably warm.

"Oh t-thank you," she sobbed, the tears of relief bubbling up, "I am so much obliged to you. I was not sure you would do it."

"Do what?" I asked gently.

"W-why, marry me!"

Would I marry her! Again, for the second time that night my spirits dropped. So she thought I could marry her. My reply was prompt and sharp.

"I am not a Justice of the Peace or whatever you

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call it in this country, nor a clergyman, nor anything of that kind. I can't marry you, my dear Honorable Miss Hadley."

She laughed. In spite of her agitation the little darling had the temerity to laugh.

"I didn't mean to marry me to—to someone else! I meant to—to marry me to—to you!" She stumbled so horribly that she had to stop, but her meaning had at last penetrated the recesses of my stupid brain, stupid to the Nth power.

"Would you m-marry me to you?" She stopped crying and waited for an answer.

Would I marry me to her!!

It was out at last!

"Yes!" I exclaimed. "Yes, my—my lady, I will." I was about to add "with pleasure," but the whole thing was so beyond belief and beyond expression that it seemed useless to try to explain that I was pleased.

For years my mother had been quizzing me about getting married. "Wait until the right girl comes along," she had always said, but she ought to have put it, "Wait until the right girl comes along—and proposes to you." Well, the right girl had come.

"There's something else," she said, "something that may not be so pleasant!"

CHAPTER IV

THE MYSTERIOUS AUNT FAITH

“**P**ERHAPS you know how I am situated,” she said with a brave apology in her voice. “You know about the—money, and how I must get married by my twenty-first birthday or I—that is—we—shall lose it forever.”

I did not know, though I was immensely glad of the fact on any terms, and I told her so. But she wanted to tell me all about it.

“The story takes me back to my father’s marriage,” she said. “My mother was an American,—a Bostonian—and from her I get my determination.”

She smiled a faint little smile and I saw that she knew Boston.

“My father, a titled Englishman, as they say over there, went across and married her. She was wealthy, but most of her money died with her; I never exactly understood. My mother was not very happy with him and she took me over to America to live with her there for three years before her death. That is why I seem more American than English, though I was only fourteen when she died; they died in the same year. Even when I came back I had an American governess for a while. When my mother was gone there wasn’t as much money as was supposed—I know I am talking very incoherently.”

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She threw back the silver fox from her throat and I saw that the story was not easy for her to tell.

"Never mind it," I said soothingly; "some other time——"

"No, I must tell it now," she persisted with a determined lift of the perfect little profile.

"My mother had many American relatives, and among the rest was a miner, in Helena, Montana. He died just after my mother and in his will he left me his fortune. But there was one proviso, which was that I must get married by the time I am twenty-one. He was a hard man, this Helena cousin; I have heard my mother tell of him. Early in his life he had a love affair which ended disastrously; and, afterwards, out of pure spite, he forced marriages upon people. He owned an immense ranch on which he employed many people, yet he would never have an unmarried person upon his place. Those who were not married when they came must find a mate immediately. He did it to make them unhappy, he said."

"A rather original way to go about it."

"He said he loved to tie two people together and watch them grow to hate each other."

"We will fool his memory!" I said promptly.

The girl heard me and a full realization of the situation, as I understood it, flashed upon her.

"I don't think you quite comprehend," she explained gently. "I must get married to save the fortune; not really married as—as other people get married—but married in—in name only—do you understand—a marriage only in name. There are family reasons why we must not let so much money go away

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from us. And, though it is unpleasant for me, I cannot see my way to do otherwise."

The carriage jolted just then and knocked my hat a trifle sideways, but I let it rest just where it had fallen over one ear.

"I have a choice of suitors," pursued Florentine. "What girl in English society has not? and it is possible that I have more than my share. But, sifted down, I have really only one, only one compelling one."

"And he is?"

"My cousin, Sir Charles Hadley—he whom you met to-night. For reasons, too involved to explain, I must marry my cousin, Sir Charles, by this time to-morrow night unless——"

"Unless?" I repeated questioningly.

"Unless I am already married to some one else."

Marry Sir Charles! Marry that monstrosity in human form; he of the purple complexion; the rasping voice and the hand. Impossible! Yet, from what I now recalled in look and gesture, Sir Charles was waiting to grasp her. As well hand a lily to a hyena!

"You shall be already married," I assured her. "And for fear something may happen I am going to suggest that we slip away immediately and have the ceremony performed."

I spoke decisively, for the gravity of the situation now dawned upon me. I knew Sir Charles, and I had had a hint of his unscrupulousness; so to save this girl from his clutches was now my duty, the first duty of any man in my position, regardless even of his own feelings; for the girl next to me, aside from

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being the woman I loved, was helpless and in a plight, a bad situation from which she must now be rescued at any hazard. But as yet I could see no hazard; it was quite simple; we could drive somewhere and be married.

The girl had thought out a better plan.

"We are on our way to the house of Lady Faith Hadley, my aunt," she said. "She will let us be married there, I hope."

"I don't see any reason why she should not."

The situation was an unusual and a trying one, but the girl smiled bravely.

"You don't know Aunt Faith."

"But I shall soon know her since we are on the way to her house and Jehu is going rather rapidly."

"But you may not find her so likeable when you come to meet her."

"What is the matter with Aunt Faith?" I asked, getting back some of the confidence which is the birth-right of every son of Columbia.

"Oh, she's all right," said the girl, unconsciously assuming the vernacular, "but a little peculiar as you will see. Years ago, when Aunt Faith was young, she was quite a belle and was famed for her beauty; she went into society, and King Edward who was then the Prince of Wales admired her and asked to meet her. Aunt Faith was, of course, charmed, and in course of time she gave a dinner for the Prince. He came with his retinue and Aunt Faith was so beside herself with joy that she didn't sleep for a week before or after. At dinner the Prince rallied Aunt Faith on being single and she in her embarrassment tried to think of a

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ready reply, but couldn't. The Prince took her hesitation for diffidence and was delighted; he praised the dinner, and, on going away, told Aunt Faith that Prince Charming would come some day. Aunt Faith blushed so exquisitely that the Prince of Wales made a prediction:

"'Prince Charming will come when you least expect him; and he will walk in at the dinner hour!'

"Aunt Faith bowed low; he would come at the dinner hour! It was as though the Almighty had spoken. That was thirty years ago and every night since she has been looking for him."

"Looking for Prince Charming?"

"Yes, she has been awaiting the arrival of Prince Charming. Aunt Faith keeps her house in town open for him though the other sisters live at Wentstone Castle; but she keeps up her town establishment of servants and livery, and every night at eight-thirty has the dinner table set for two. It is perfect in every detail, silver, linen, glass, wine and menu—and the covers are always laid for just two."

"Has Prince Charming never arrived?"

"No, though Aunt Faith makes an elaborate toilette for him each night. At promptly twenty minutes after eight she goes down into the drawing-room and sits, fan in hand, watching the door and waiting for his step. A footman sits in the hall waiting to open it before the bell shall ring. Aunt Faith waits until nine, then she goes into the dining-room and eats her solitary meal."

"What becomes of the other plate?"

"It remains opposite Aunt Faith, a mute re-

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minder that Prince Charming may come to-morrow night."

"And the next night?"

"It is the same thing over again."

The girl stopped, threw back her head and laughed, showing the most exquisite pearls. The thought of Aunt Faith was enough to make her forget her own troubles for a minute, and the relief of a laugh was needed.

"How old is Aunt Faith?" I asked.

"Sixty-one years old. She has been waiting, sitting opposite the empty plate of the dilatory Prince Charming for nearly thirty years."

Again Florentine laughed. But this time my face did not relax. It grew solemn instead, for the prospect of interviewing Aunt Faith suddenly became fraught with difficulties.

"Does she expect us?" I inquired.

"Yes, I sent a messenger to her," said the girl, "and at the same time I dispatched a message to the Rev. Jedediah Pancoast to meet us there. He will be waiting when we arrive."

Lady Florentine had evidently counted upon me and my heart thrilled at her confidence and her unconscious use of the word "we."

"I wish you had 'phoned her to be sure," I ventured.

"Telephoned Aunt Faith!" exclaimed the girl, going off into another little burst of merriment, "that shows that you have not yet grasped the peculiarities of Lady Faith Hadley. Never has my aunt had a telephone in her house, nor will she have

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one even in the servants' quarters. The Prince of Wales told her years ago that he did not think the telephone would ever be practicable for home use. And to this day Aunt Faith is sure that it is not practicable. She wouldn't try one for a Sepoy mine."

Aunt Faith was growing more and more formidable, but in my copybook years before I had written the words "Faint heart never won Fair Lady," and the line came back to me now. Little did I think, at that time, that the teachings of youth would be of so much support to me in after life.

There was a lull. It was evident that the carriage was slackening its pace. Then it stopped with a bump and I found myself looking out and up into the windows of Aunt Faith's mansion.

"Let me go in and see her first," said Florentine; "you wait here until I send for you."

I helped her out of the carriage and up the front steps; before I could press the button the door flew open.

"Wait!" she repeated. Then she disappeared in the flash of light and the door shut behind her.

Often afterwards I pictured that open doorway with Florentine's slim form outlined in it like a brilliant figure standing against a sunset glow.

Little did I know that before I should lay eyes upon her again there would fall upon her life a tragedy of circumstance that would forever change the coloring of existence for her.

I stood outside the door and waited, but she did not come. I could hear within the suppressed

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sound of voices, one rising sharp and clear, a young voice, very like Florentine's, yet so agonized that I could not recognize it; the other, older and quieter, but very firm. The sounds grew stiller; then, above the low murmuring, there rose a shriek, a wailing sob that broke the quietude of the night and died away as abruptly as it had risen. After that I listened breathlessly, almost pressed against the door, but still Florentine did not return.

A Sphinx-like hush had fallen within; it was as though a presence had passed out.

CHAPTER V

I PLAY PRINCE CHARMING

AUNT FAITH lived in a small but very exclusive residence in a very exclusive neighborhood. But the thing that struck me as I looked up at the house was its festive appearance, in spite of its deathly stillness. It was illuminated from top to bottom; from English basement windows to the top of the Queen Anne roof the yellow beams twinkled, while from the drawing-room windows there fairly shot out comets of light.

"She was expecting us," I reasoned, "yet she does not open the door."

As Florentine did not return I had no alternative except to wait, but the shriek, following by retreating footsteps and the sudden, almost deathly, quiet filled me with alarm.

Suddenly, breaking on the stillness of the night, an upper window flew open and there was a quick order, as though a hurried direction were being given. The coachman who had been standing at the curb, jumped upon the box and cracked his whip, and, before I could call to him, he had galloped his horses to the corner and turned quickly out of sight.

I was alone on the steps, the carriage gone and Florentine was still inside the house.

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I could endure the uncertainty no longer, so, at the risk of injuring my cause, I touched the button.

The instant I did so the front door flew open as though touched by a spring and a bowing footman invited me to enter; as I stepped in, a lackey divested me of hat and coat.

Involuntarily I gazed about for Florentine. She was nowhere to be seen; she was doubtless in the handsome room from the open door of which came a brilliant light shading to gold in the mirrored reflection of the period drawing-room.

I gave my name to the footman. Stepping to the drawing-room door, he announced, in a much drilled voice, "Mr. Roman Elliott!"

An elderly lady whom I recognized at once as Aunt Faith, stood in the middle of the drawing-room. She was dressed in a quaint fashion; her gown of grey silk was festooned with lace and clusters of pink roses held its soft draperies. It did not take a lace expert to see that her straight old shoulders were folded in a white lace shawl worth its weight in pearls. In her left hand she held a lace handkerchief on which there was a breath of rose; in her right hand was a fan. Hers was a compelling personality.

But I noticed, in spite of her efforts at composure that she was trembling violently and the hand that held the handkerchief was shaking like an aspen as she lifted it to her pale lips.

Lady Faith held out her hand with the fan still in it and I took it, bowing very low over it. At that moment I thanked my stars that I was in a

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dress suit or I would have felt like a chimney sweep in the presence of a Princess. As I rose I glanced around for Florentine. She was not in the drawing-room.

"Lady Faith Hadley, I presume I have the honor of addressing?" I hazarded.

"I am Lady Faith Hadley." There was a tremor of expectation in the fine old voice.

"I am Roman Elliott, Mr. Roman Elliott," I repeated, "and I came—came here to—see your niece, the Honorable Florentine Hadley. She is here, I believe."

Instantly Lady Faith's smile faded, faded—froze!

It seems that she was a little deaf and had not caught my name as the lackey announced it. And, in place of the look that was all expectation, there came one that was half disappointment and half anger. I was not the long expected Prince Charming after all!

"My niece is not here, Mr. Elliott," she said stiffly and with a total change of manner.

"But she was here——"

"Yes, she came, but she has gone. No!" in answer to my questioning look, "she will not return!"

"But she surely left some word—some message!"

Lady Faith pondered. A look of craft came into her countenance; she was a woman of the world and keenly alive to all its ways. Save for her one eccentricity—her hallucination about Prince Charming—she was as wide-awake as only a shrewd old lady can be.

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"She left no word except to tell you that she thanked you—and to—go."

Lady Faith's lips closed stubbornly as she delivered this message.

"But you knew the—the object of our visit—her coming and mine—here to-night. Surely she left some other word than that I was to—go!"

"Yes, yes," assented Lady Faith, "I understand perfectly. My niece tried to leave some—other message but could not. I sympathize very deeply with her. But the fact is—as she now knows—that I cannot help either you or her."

The old lady glanced at the footman who was seated in the hall, and at the servants waiting beyond to serve the dinner, and she lowered her voice until it sank to a whisper which I could hardly hear myself.

"My niece," she said, picking her words deliberately, "wishes me to inform you that the arrangement with you is impracticable, though she did not know it until this evening. When she arrived here she learned certain things—certain disclosures—that make it out of the question."

"But she must be married by to-morrow night if she would fulfill the terms of her cousin's will!"

"She expects to carry them out," insisted the old lady obstinately, while the silken folds of her gown shook with agitation, "and it is for that purpose that she has just left this house."

"But to whom, may I ask—you'll pardon me for being inquisitive, but circumstances not of my own seeking brought me into this case, and I feel that I

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am entitled to stay until the young lady herself dismisses me—to whom is she going to be married?"

Aunt Faith unfurled her small satin fan.

"My niece is to marry her cousin, Sir Charles Hadley!"

"But she does not want to marry him," I made bold to say.

"On the contrary, she is most anxious. There were some family matters—a secret of which she was never told—and this, when she learned it, immediately changed her view—she should, I admit, have been made aware of—the situation before. It was to be sure of meeting Sir Charles that she called her carriage around to the rear entrance of this house just now; she could not lose a moment, but begged me to make her excuses and say farewell for her."

I listened, too chagrined for speech. "Surely, Lady Faith," I burst out, "this has not your approval."

"On the contrary," she observed quite haughtily, "I commend it thoroughly. My niece should be very thankful—under the circumstances—to get an English baronet—the horror of her situation—I am sure if you knew——"

"I don't want to know," I flung at her. A storm of words sprang to my lips, but I held it back; but, though I kept my tongue, I could not check the flood of crimson that tided my face. Lady Faith saw it.

"Your protests and your temper are alike wasted," said she. "Florentine has made her choice—she could make no other!"

"This is monstrous," I burst forth, unable now to pick my words. "It is horrible, an act without con-

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science or justification. Nothing can express how despicable it is. One moment the girl shrinks in deadly loathing from this man who represents to her all that is ugly and repulsive. The next moment she accepts him gladly as a suitor, is eager for the match and—you tell me—goes riding off into the country at night after him, in order to tell him of her change of heart and hasten her marriage. Lady Faith, I ask you if it is within the power of mortal man to believe such a tale! I know that something deeply tragic must have occurred to make her change her mind in this way."

"Something tragic *did* occur," admitted Lady Faith, "and my niece was, naturally, much upset by it. At first she gave way to tumultuous emotion, but she conquered herself and is now ready to do her part."

"And when is she to be married to Sir Charles?"

"To-night at Wentstone Castle. I have sent the Rev. Mr. Pancoast on ahead."

"Then he shall know all before he performs this ceremony," threatened I, "for I believe it to be a machination of Sir Charles Hadley."

Lady Faith settled her head-dress and shrugged her lace covered shoulders with a gesture of dissent. "I dine in a little while," she said, reverting to Prince Charming and casting an arch glance at the dinner table and another glance toward the front door. "And I am rather expecting a guest to dine with me. But if—if the guest does not come—I shall eat alone and then——"

"What then?" I asked sharply, for I was not going to be tamely side-tracked when this matter of Florentine's happiness was burning its way into my heart.

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"Then I am going out to Wentstone; Sir Charles has requested me to be there."

"But at this time of night?"

"Sir Charles desires it and his word is law in this family."

There was no need of arguing longer with Lady Faith, so I went out into the hall and had the footman put me in my coat and let me out of the door.

Lady Faith's words: "My niece is determined to marry her cousin, Sir Charles," echoed in my ears. Suppose it should be true! At the same time I, as her accepted suitor, had a right to demand an explanation at her own lips.

She had called her carriage and gone to Wentstone. Where the Castle lay and how long a drive it was from London I had not the vaguest idea, but it was evidently not far or Aunt Faith would scarcely have planned the midnight journey.

I stood on the steps debating my next move, when, by a mental process, I received a hint. I am and have always been a believer in sub-conscious phenomena. I know that I am prompted by something sub-mental to do the thing which my poor conscious brain—perplexed by exterior things—could never have conceived.

My eye wandered down the quiet street, deserted now save for an occasional pedestrian. Far off, going every second away from me, were two horses. They were saddled; one was ridden by a groom, the other was led.

My conscious mind, prompted by the sub-conscious, worked quickly.

"Yes! Why not?" I asked myself. I had a right

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to follow her if ever a man had a right to follow a woman.

I ran down the stoop and along the street, my footsteps making a distinct ring on the pavement. The horseman moved steadily along ahead of me, his horses' hoofs striking the smooth pavement with a dull patter. Could I overtake them? I dared not shout, but I could whistle. A shrill blast woke the quiet, followed by another. The horseman turned. I stood under the corner lamp and waved my hat; he saw me and in a minute had reversed the horses' heads and was coming toward me. He was a riding groom returning leisurely from a late park lesson.

"Can you give me a lift?" I called as soon as he was within shouting distance.

"'Ow?" he asked, removing his hat.

"A lift; a horse; I want to ride out into the country," I exclaimed impatiently. "Do you know where Wentstone Castle is?"

"Yes, sir, since I 'ave worked there, sir!"

"Then take me there, part of the way at least; I am trying to overtake a carriage that started some time ago. Is there a short cut to Wentstone?"

"They 'ave made one, sir, but it h'isn't h'open to the public yet, sir."

"Never mind, take me through it; we can ride it, I guess, if we go single file. Now you lead on and hurry."

The groom rubbed his head stupidly.

"We can't 'urry, sir, because the road is all broke stone."

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"Well, go as fast as you can," I ordered, "then you can leave me in the road and go back home."

He agreed after a sufficient delay to set my nerves tingling with impatience. Then, with a touch of the whip he started his pony and I galloped hard after, prudence thrown to the winds.

CHAPTER VI

THE HADLEY FAMILY

AS we pounded along the road, which changed rapidly from smooth pavement to dirt and then to the stony cross-cut, I had an abundance of time to reflect.

Occasionally, where the stones were piled high in the road, we got out and led our horses; but most of the time we worked our way stumblingly but steadily along the broken path.

"Hurry," I ordered the groom.

"Carn't 'urry, sir," was the reply. "We'll 'urt these 'orses' legs."

He spoke truly, for a minute later his horse stepped into a hole and went down. But I pushed on past him impatiently, leaving him to follow with his limping animal.

My acquaintance with the lady whose carriage I was going to intercept was brief enough; the meagre details of it loomed up through the shadows of the night, making fantastic figures of light and darkness. Once my horse slipped and plunged headlong, but I pulled him up; even the difficulties of the way did not prevent me from reviewing the whole of my knowledge of the girl.

And little enough it was. For I had known Florentine Hadley by sight only ten days.

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It was the tea-hour, of the very day of my arrival in London, that I met Lady Hensington by appointment at the Savoy. Scarcely were we seated in the palm garden when there entered the shrubbed archway a tall and fashionably dressed young woman behind whom puffed a short, stoutish, middle aged man of heavy features and protruding blue eyes. The man carried what at first appeared to me to be a parcel awkwardly wrapped in a white napkin, but as he came closer I saw that it was his own hand that was done up in this fashion; and that the napkin was an elaborately embroidered wrapping cloth.

But it was on the young woman that my eyes were fixed; as they drew closer, I noticed that she was possessed of a curious and most absorbing beauty; while the man was equally endued with ugliness of a disturbing type. That he was much older than she I saw at a glance.

They bowed as they passed us; and, over our table there floated a deep fragrance which I traced to a large bunch of lilies-of-the-valley which the girl wore in her corsage. For she was only a girl in years, and apparently a very innocent one at that. I watched her, and as she came nearer, the impression of youthfulness deepened; for in spite of her height, her carriage and her self-possession, she had a face on which experience had left no marks and an expression that was one of much sweetness. Never had I seen a face of such almost distressing loveliness.

I could not observe her features distinctly in that

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passing glance, but I saw that they were quite classically perfect, small delicate nose, round chin, great wide blue eyes and a forehead from whose temples the hair swept back in waves of silver. It was her hair that specially caught my eye, for it was blonde; not yellow, gold nor henna, but a pure silver of a shade such as one seldom sees except among the Marguerites of the Rhineland or the Ingas of the Norse.

But this girl was English, and her manner as she bowed showed her to be one of untainted breeding and perfect form. Yet, though her full red lips parted easily in a girlish smile, I thought there was something in the wide blue eyes that suggested anxiety, and I could have sworn that, with little effort, the anxiety could have deepened to terror. But her loveliness; how winning it was!

I was quite prepared for Lady Hensington's next remark.

"Lady Florentine Hadley, the beauty of the past two London seasons!"

"And the man?" I found voice to ask.

"Her cousin, Sir Charles Hadley. Rumor has it that they are engaged to be married; are, indeed, to be married very soon."

"I don't believe rumor," I said, setting down my cup with a rattle.

"Isn't your tea right?" queried Lady Hensington. "We have better tea in New York than they do here, for all their talk about their English tea."

"No, all wrong; I mean yes, it's all right, or I hope so."

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"The girl is as fine as she looks," gossiped Lady Hensington, not noticing my diversified statements, "but she's half American. Her mother was a Bostonian; married here in England; took the girl back to school there; then died. I'll tell you all about it some time; but the girl is fine."

I agreed with her instantly that the girl was fine, and I could have added the comparative and the superlative, for it took no more than one glance at Florentine Hadley to tell me that, though endowed by nature with everything desirable, she had added one thing more, a surpassing grace of character and an unselfishness which acted as a Lydian stone to bring out that trait in others. This gentle spirit gave her face the Madonna touch which made it so positively worshipful.

"Who is this Sir Charles?" I forced myself to ask after another gulp at the bitter cup.

"Capitalist, promoter, miner, banker, rogue! I don't know how to answer exactly," laughed Lady Hensington. "But I know he was a younger son and that he went out to India to earn the fortune which his father could not hand to him. Men who seek a thing usually find that thing if they don't find anything else. It is a case of ask and ye shall receive—be it good or bad! Sir Charles found a mine in India, one of those now rare gold mines in the gold country, and he made a fortune out of it. He became interested in the Sepoys and is here now promoting a gigantic mining project in which everybody in London is invited to invest money. He is shrewd and fortunate but he has a reputation for being none too scrupulous. But un-

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scrupulousness is a peculiarity of the born cripple, I've heard."

"The born cripple!" I exclaimed in some surprise.

"Yes," said Lady Hensington, "Sir Charles is a cripple; he has a crippled hand. He always carries it rolled mummy fashion in fine linen, extravagantly embroidered."

"How very remarkable, but surely such a fashion renders the hand more conspicuous!"

Lady Hensington lifted her eyebrows; "I'm sure I don't know. Some say he carries it so because he is proud of it as an added mark of distinction; others declare that he keeps it wrapped as a reminder that he owes the world a grudge."

"I'd like to make it deeper," I interposed.

"He owes the world a grudge on his mother's side of the house."

"I am more interested than I can tell you," I declared, "and I wish you would tell me more."

"I suppose so," said Lady Hensington, on whom my admiration of Florentine had not passed unobserved. "And I'll humor you this time because I must admit that Sir Charles interests me also. Ugly as he is, and bad as I believe him to be, there is a certain fascination about his personality besides his unscrupulousness. The story begins with his mother, dear, timid Lady Louise, who died when Sir Charles was a baby; he is now forty-two or thereabouts. Lady Louise stood in deadly terror of her husband who was literally her lord and master. He was of the rigid school of disciplinarians who believe that if you dislike to do a thing you must do it—because it is good for you to

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do what you do not like to do. He prepared many a surprise for poor, shrinking Lady Louise, and the last one brought about her death."

"How perfectly horrible!"

"He delighted in shocking her just at times when he should have been most careful."

"I hope the old reprobate is dead!"

"His mortal self died but his spirit lives again in Sir Charles."

I shivered visibly; and to think that he was engaged to be married to—her!

Lady Hensington deliberately prepared a cup of tea. She was thoroughly enjoying the interest with which I listened to her story, and, womanlike, she wanted to keep me waiting.

"Well," said she, beginning at last, "one day Sir Peter came home bringing with him a dinner guest—this is ancient history you know; it happened years ago;—the dinner was just about to be served when Lady Louise sent a servant down begging Sir Peter to excuse her. Sir Peter went to her apartments upstairs to know the reason why and Lady Louise told him that she had that day learned something which, while it pleased her greatly, had somewhat upset her nerves, and she must be careful, oh so very careful! Accidents had not been unknown to her and—the story is a little—little," hesitated Lady Hensington.

"Go on, don't mind me; I'll try to forget it!"

"When Lady Louise, with the smelling salts at her nose, told Sir Peter that she could not go down to meet a strange guest, a determined look came into Sir

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Peter's eye. It was a good—an especially good—time to discipline the lady; she must do that which she did not want to do! So he insisted; and, in spite of her protests, he forced her to let her maid hook her into a dinner gown; then, trembling, nervous, shaking with that queer creepy chill, she followed her lord to the drawing-room. There sat the guest, a stranger. He rose at their entrance and stood waiting for the introduction. Sir Peter pronounced the names, and Lady Louise, still dazed with the revelation of the afternoon and her own dizziness, took a step forward. She held out her right hand and the stranger, after a second's hesitation, put his hand into hers. Lady Louise took it, felt it, and tried to give it a little shake. Instead she glanced at it, shrieked and crumpled up on the floor! Sir Peter let her lie there—for discipline—while he took the arm of the guest and marched him off to the dining-room where they sat and feasted until past midnight. Meanwhile poor Lady Louise, slowly reviving, dragged herself from the floor and upstairs to her own room where she took to her bed for a week."

"But the guest, what was the matter with him?"

"It seems that there were no fingers on his right hand and Lady Louise did not know it until she found his hand in hers with her fingers closing tightly around the crippled thing.

"For the next months she led a life of coming dread, and, when the child was born, her ladyship begged to see it; they refused; she insisted, and they showed it to her. There were no fingers on its right hand. And that," said Lady Hensington, rising from the tea table,

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"is why Sir Charles carries his right hand wrapped in a handkerchief."

"Awful!" I exclaimed as I helped Lady Hensington on with her wraps. "It makes me long for a breath of fresh air."

As we left the Palm Garden I managed to look back at Florentine—it seemed the most natural thing in the world to call her by her first name—she sat facing Sir Charles, but her eyes had followed us to the door. Perhaps it was my fancy, but she looked like a bird in a snare, its wings beating against the cruel cords.

I thought of the conversation again that night, and the look of terror in Florentine's eyes deepened as I pictured them. I wondered if I would see her again; and I mentally answered yes. Fortune favored me. The very next day I called upon the aged Duchess of Hume; I had promised to present a letter from someone in Baltimore. The Duchess was eighty and full of gossip; her friends said she was at once the liveliest and the wickedest old personage in London; certainly the greatest gossip. She was bursting full of talk and dying for some one to whom to tell it. Her Grace was delighted to see me and at once poured me a cup of tea.

By adroit steps I led the conversation around to the Honorable Florentine and her cousin, Sir Charles; for I must confess that the object of my visit to this old lady, who was a living Blue Book of English society, was to learn more about the girl whose face had so deeply stirred me. Know the Hadleys! Of course she did. "Charity Hadley was Flower Girl at my wedding," said the gossipy old lady, warming up to the

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subject. "Charity is one of the three sisters, Florentine's aunts, and she lives out at Wentstone, the Castle in the Woods, not far from London."

"Tell me about her," I had entreated.

The Duchess settled her headdress. She had been pouring items into inattentive ears; but here was a chance to have a close listener. "Lady Charity is the aunt of the Honorable Florentine," she repeated, "and when she was a girl she was very beautiful, almost as beautiful as Florentine. They were a family of beauties when I was a young matron. But Charity was the prettiest of all."

"She is married, I suppose," I remarked, for I was determined to gain all the information possible about the relatives of the lovely young woman of the Savoy Palm Garden.

"No, she's single," said the old lady; "and she'll stay single, too; she's had her romance."

"Tell it to me."

The Duchess was only too pleased. "It began when Charity was a school girl, away at a convent. She came home during her vacations and she got acquainted with the curate of Wentstone. Charity adored goodness and fell in love with him at first sight. As soon as she left the convent their engagement was announced."

"But why did they not get married; you say she is single?"

"No, they never married," said the Duchess. "It was very strange. Charity loved him and he loved her, but he was one of those men who go in for perfection. It was odd that Charity should have worshiped

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him as she did, for he was the most peculiar man that ever lived."

"In what way was he so strange?"

"Why, he believed in the crucifixion of the spirit, that was what he called it. His theology told him that we were put here on earth to be unhappy, and he worked hard upon Charity's spirit to make her wretched."

"Did he succeed?"

"Almost, and he would have succeeded utterly but that he died just as Charity was beginning to be miserable. He had sinned in his youth, so he said, and he was anxious to confess his sin to Charity. He used to tell her how, previous to entering the theological seminary, he had had his experience as a Lothario. But that, since his eighteenth birthday, his conduct had been exemplary and he wanted her to know all about it."

"Very fine of him, I am sure."

"Charity used to listen wide-eyed and beg him not to worry so for his past sins. But the worst part of it came when he used to urge Charity to confess her imperfections—the faults of her early life. As Charity was only out of a convent a year and had been spending her vacations at home, drinking tea and eating bread and butter, she needed no confessional. But the curate could not be convinced of it. He said she was too pretty to be innocent, and poor Charity would cry because she had nothing to confess.

"She must have loved him deeply."

"She did, in spite of everything, though he wasn't much to look at either. He was tall and thin, bald

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headed and narrow faced. Narrow was the word to describe him all through. He had a good appetite but he didn't believe in indulging it, so he lived on sandwiches as they seemed to him less wicked than roast beef. After he had spent the afternoons with Charity, and had had one of his talks with her, they would dine on sandwiches and he would go away. Of course Charity cried herself to sleep, and the curate would come around again a few days later looking taller, narrower and paler than ever."

"A fascinating courtship!"

"But poor pretty little Charity enjoyed it, or she tried to make herself believe she did. It was the religious strain in the Hadleys—they had a grand uncle who went into the church—cropping out in Charity. When the curate died he left her his Oxford Bible with instructions to read it through twice a year."

"And has she done it?"

"Oh, dear yes, she has done it, and faithfully. She reads it as he taught her to read it. I called on her a year ago and she was reading the Bible through for the word Disgrace. She had read it through for Despised and for Confusion and Condemnation and Despair, and next she was going to look for something else—I don't remember what it was."

"She is reading it through for certain words?" I asked, my curiosity increasing.

"Yes, don't you understand? She found that Despised occurs twenty times in the Bible, or was it forty times? She counts them; and that Confusion could be found thirty, or maybe it was seventy times. The curate told her it was the only enlightened way to

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read the Bible. She reads it pencil in hand. Her Bible is always with her, and when she lays it down she wraps it in the black silk handkerchief which the curate used to wear around his neck; she's done it for thirty years."

"Then Lady Charity is fully——"

I might have added fully able and old enough to avoid mournful entanglements in future, when the door opened and a guest was announced, and I was cut off from further queries.

But I returned in a day; making some trivial excuse concerning the Baltimore family. I wanted to hear more about the Hadleys.

I led the conversation back to them. The old Lady did not remember that she had gossiped about them the day before, but was only too ready to talk. Oh, yes! She remembered the old Duke of Hadley, dead these sixty years or more. He had been a man with a domestic tragedy in his life. She would tell me.

The story as it stamped itself on my mental reservation was that the old Duke of Hadley, having married late in life, wanted an heir, and when, after ten years of wedded life, none had appeared, he took to upbraiding his spouse. He stormed and she wept.

Then, gentleman fashion, he wreaked his spite on living things and for weeks he would be off trapping and shooting wild animals. During his visits home he spent his days adding to his gun collection, which soon grew to be the finest in England.

One day the Duchess whispered something to him, something she had not dared to say before for fear of false alarm, and the Duke shouted with joy. Then fol-

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lowed great days in the Castle. The Duke shot no more but spent all his time collecting guns—for the heir. "He shall be a famous sportsman," he declared.

Then one night there was commotion in the Castle and servants flew in all directions. The Duke sat in the library surrounded by his guns and waited. After awhile a nurse opened the door.

"It's a girl," announced she.

"Hell!" exclaimed the Duke.

In a few minutes another nurse came running.

"It's another girl," said the nurse.

"Double Hell!" yelled the disappointed Duke.

A third time the nurse opened the door; "It's three girls," she whispered, terrified.

"Hell! three times Hell," roared the outraged Duke. And straightway he grabbed the gun nearest him and disappeared. It was three months before he came home. And, meanwhile, the Duchess, recovering slowly, named the little girls Faith, Hope and Charity. She said she wanted the Christian graces to be in the family somehow.

When the Duke came home, he was testy enough. He stormed and stormed and would not eat. One morning he got back on the old topic of his disappointment, and, rising from the breakfast table, he advanced toward the Duchess shouting and shaking his fist.

"I wanted a boy, I tell you; I wanted a boy! I wanted a boy so I could will my guns to him, because they are——"

There was a gurgle in this throat and the old man sank to the floor in a seizure. Then came a sort of

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sleep or coma which lasted two years. At the end of two years he opened his mouth and said: "— great guns!" Then he slowly died and was laid in the Hadley vault, where he has slept over sixty years. As for the guns, they had drifted around until they had come into the possession of Sir Charles.

The valetudinarian Duchess of Hume cackled merrily as she told me the story; and soon after I came away. It was, indeed, an eccentric family out of which Florentine, exquisite flower of a long line of English ancestors had blossomed as an exotic. Her mother was an American, and this fact would account for the sprightliness which had been so noticeable in her.

I had seen her daily since for eight beautiful, blessed days; and my first impression of her that she was that rare thing, a reigning beauty with a heart of gold, had but deepened in my mind.

I touched my horse and pushed along, for our pace had been slow but steady.

My reflections were broken by the groom:

"'Ere you h'are, sir!"

We had reached the end of the cross cut and were at the broad, main highway.

"Is this the road?"

"Yes, sir; straight road to Wentstone, sir."

"Very well! Now you may go."

I slid off my horse and handed him the reins.

"I shall not need the horse again."

The groom hesitated; the night was dark, the rain was falling and he was leaving me in the mid-

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dle of a deserted country road, far from human-kind.

"Shall I wait, sir?"

"No! you can go!" I repeated sharply, "and here's for your trouble."

The man took the money, tipped his hat, and, after the fashion of English servants, obeyed without further question, leaving me standing there, in my dress suit, in the drizzling night.

CHAPTER VII

THE ADVENTURE OF THE BLACK BAG

I STOOD in the open peering toward London; had I mistaken the rapidity with which her carriage would travel and had she passed me and driven on to the Castle? Which way should I go?

My search of the road was rewarded by the sound of horses' hoofs; they grew more distinct until I realized that they were very close; the road was so dark they were almost upon me before I recognized the coachman and the correct livery of the Hadley family.

I lifted my hand for the coachman to stop; he remembered me at once, and, though he must have wondered at finding me here in the open road, without horse or equipage, he pulled up.

I opened the carriage door. There, crouched in a corner, as I had expected to find her, was Florentine. But, though I surmised that she would not be in a happy mood, I was not prepared for such an utter abandon of misery as that in which she was plunged. She had flung off her cloak and with her head buried in her gloved hands she was sobbing convulsively—hysterically.

"Florentine!" At sound of my voice she lifted her head; I do not think she noticed that I called

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her by her first name. I stepped into the carriage and shut the door. She turned on me fiercely.

"You must not," she cried. "You cannot! I forbid you to come!"

The horses had started and the carriage was jolting over the rough road; I waited for her to become quiet.

"Tell me what is the matter," I said as her sobs ceased. "I am entitled to know; it is no more than right—that you should explain."

"There is nothing to tell; I have made up my mind to marry my cousin!"

She was making an effort to regain her composure and was feigning a coolness which I knew she could not feel.

"Do you want to marry him?" I asked in some chagrin.

She observed my tone and tried to keep her voice as steady as my own.

"Yes, it is my desire to marry him——"

"And you love him?"

She evaded the question.

"I shall love him—perhaps,—but I think I am most fortunate in having him offer me his hand—he must be deeply in love with me—knowing our family secret!"

Her voice broke in another uncontrollable sob.

"What is this dreadful thing that has happened?" I asked. "What did Aunt Faith tell you that so changed you? Can you not confide in me?"

She cried piteously, with her face buried in her

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hands: "Oh, let me shut it out—the disgrace—it is too awful—awful."

The sound of her weeping filled the carriage.

I ventured to put my hand upon her shoulder.

"Florentine," I protested, "I love you too well to have you sacrifice yourself; though we are little more than strangers, as time is counted, yet we have lived as much as many persons live in years. I speak to you not only as a man speaking to the woman he worships, but as a brother would advise a little sister. If you love Sir Charles—if his ugliness—his brutal temper—his hand—none of these things disgust you!"

It was a wicked thrust and I flush at it to this day. But I was little prepared for its electrical effect upon Florentine. Perhaps it was because she had grown to abhor the hand; perhaps some drop of the blood of Lady Louise who had bequeathed the crippled fingers to her child rushed red through her veins; but she gave a wild shriek, and throwing up her arms, she fell back in the carriage gasping for breath.

"Forgive me!" I pleaded. "I did not know——"

"Oh the awful hand, the wicked face, the terrible voice, I shall go mad—I shall die!"

"Be quiet, Florentine," I commanded, "and promise me that you will, at least, not let them perform the marriage ceremony to-night."

She agreed, though she did not half know what she was saying; and, then, I tried to get out of her the terrible secret which had so changed her.

But she would not tell me; on this point she was obdurate.

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I talked of various things, and soon she was quite herself again. Perhaps it was the hypnotism of love; maybe it is the magnetism of youth, but the mind rebounds; and in an incredibly short space of time I had wrung from her a laugh, while her exquisite smiling lips assured me that if left to herself she would not marry Sir Charles and—more to me—that she would try to carry out our marriage contract.

"Do you love me?" I asked abruptly.

"I have loved you for ten days," she replied intensely, "ever since the time I first saw you in the Palm Garden of the Savoy with Lady Hensington."

It was love at first sight with her as with me. But this, while unusual enough under ordinary conditions, strange to say, provoked no comment from me now. I had gone out to her too wholly and unreservedly to be surprised that she should recognize me in return.

"Then, if the aunts will give their consent, why can we not be married here at Wentstone as we proposed?"

"They will not agree," she said decidedly. "Oh, you do not know the awful situation—the awful disgrace that hangs over me—and Sir Charles will expose it—and tell all London to-morrow—if I do not marry him."

"And that is what Lady Faith told you?"

"Yes, oh, yes! And she begged me to marry Cousin Charles—if he were to tell—it would kill us all."

"And he will keep quiet?"

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"If I marry him—not otherwise—he offers me no choice but that."

"Someone ought to murder him!" I exclaimed, closing my fists and clinching my teeth.

"Murder, oh no," she shivered. "But he is leaving no stone unturned—and, now, Aunt Faith is helping him."

"Would you marry me if you were free to make a choice?" I asked.

Her face flushed. "Yes!" she uttered softly. And, then, in a tone of girlish despair she wailed, "Oh—you do not know—or you would not ask me—I am not what you think I am."

The blood leaped in my veins; she loved me; her heart was mine. I cared not for Sir Charles.

"If they will consent it shall be with their consent; and if they do not it shall be without!"

Her face took on a lovely blush. She was neither a vacillating woman nor a coquette; but in few lives does there ever come a moment requiring more decision; certainly in her young life there had never before come a situation so fraught with conflicting emotions; and she knew not what to do; she leaned toward me, but the terrible burden—the new burden—weighed her down.

"I'm going to marry you," I said with determination, "unless you yourself——"

"I could not forbid you if I would," she replied.

And that is all she would say.

"We must go out to Wentstone," she added after a minute's thought. "It is the only thing to do. But it

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is a terribly long distance, nearly an hour's drive from here—and you're thinly dressed; you'll be cold."

"Who said so?" I responded, buttoning my light coat around me in the sharp wind that whistled through the carriage windows. "It's you I'm thinking about, just now."

"I'm warm as a tea cake," she said brightly, "and I don't mind the drive. But it's awfully good of you—to help me——" She tried to speak calmly, but her tragedy crept into her voice.

Her voice, when she said that she was not what I thought she was, recurred to me, but I dismissed it.

"Stop!" I said, "there's one thing more. The Rev. Jedediah Pancoast!"

"Did Aunt Faith see him?"

"Yes, and she told him to go on out to Wentstone. Do you suppose he will wait for us?"

The girl laughed, but it was a laugh with more weariness than mirth in it.

"We'll get there before the Rev. Mr. Pancoast," she assured me.

"How do you figure that?" I asked. "He must surely have had half an hour's start of us."

"You don't know Mr. Pancoast; and what's more important you don't know his horse. If I were a man I'd bet," she said with a merry twinkle, "I'd bet that we will be there an hour ahead of Mr. Pancoast."

"What is he driving?" I ventured to ask.

"He's driving Jephtha's Daughter. Jephtha was slow enough, but Jephtha's Daughter is worse; Jephtha dropped dead the night of Aunt Hope's wedding and

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since then Mr. Pancoast has driven Jephtha's Daughter."

"I don't want to seem inquisitive," I remarked, "but would you mind telling me how long ago that was?"

"Nearly thirty years ago," said Florentine. "And you needn't apologize for asking me; Jephtha's Daughter is not at all sensitive about her age. She is very well preserved and she and the Rev. Mr. Pancoast have an understanding. When she goes to sleep Mr. Pancoast wakes up. And when Mr. Pancoast sleeps Jephtha's Daughter wakens."

"How did they think of so brilliant an arrangement?" I queried.

"Oh, now you take me into the depths of a parish disgrace," pursued Florentine, waxing warm, woman fashion, over a scandal. "Once upon a time they used to doze off anywhere. But one day, when Mr. Pancoast was asleep, Jephtha's Daughter stopped and took a nap also. It happened to be in front of a Public House, and when Mr. Pancoast woke up one of the vestry was shaking him. 'Good thing I happened to be passing,' said the vestryman. Mr. Pancoast protested, but the vestryman insisted upon getting into the buggy and driving Jephtha's Daughter home. Ever after that, he would wink at Mr. Pancoast and tap his forehead and say: 'Never mind; don't apologize; I've been there myself!'

"After that experience Mr. Pancoast made an arrangement with Jephtha's Daughter. Now, before he climbs into the buggy, he takes hold of her ear and whispers something into it. Perhaps he tells her she can take her nap first."

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As she talked, I had time to note the gladness of her nature as revealed by her voice, which was clear and true; and she had that rare gift in woman, a delightful sense of humor.

"I suppose you are wondering how I came to speak to you this evening," she said, lapsing again into a half anxious mood. "It must seem to you almost as though I had selected a total stranger and that it was most bold of me; but you were not a stranger, for Lady Hensington told me all about you long ago. She told me how she brought you over from the States to help with her daughter's wedding presents and how—er—highly she had valued your services and how much—er—she had paid you to watch the Hepworth alone. You see, I could not help trusting you."

The Hepworth! If I had not been so deeply in love a pang of reproach would have shot through me. But I felt no pang.

"And she told me something else. She told me that she valued you so much that she took you with her wherever she went—not only for safety, for you know she wears valuable pearls—but even for companionship."

How self-sacrificing of Lady Hensington. Just wait until she secures my valued companionship at another social function!

"And when she told me about you, I knew I should like you and that I could trust you. But that wasn't the only reason, for I admired your face, too. I don't know," she added still trying to justify herself in my eyes, "just why it was that I liked you so much."

"You needn't try to discover," I said with as warm

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a glance as I dared venture. "The fact that you like me is enough for me."

But she seemed determined to clear herself still further in my eyes of any appearance of forwardness.

"It was almost as if I had confidence in you at first sight," she declared. "And, then, when I saw you at the Carlton and at the Savoy, having tea with her and looking over papers, I knew I could trust you with my—my affairs. And you must pardon me for going about less chaperoned than other English girls of title; my position as the daughter of an American mother has made me a little different from them."

"I know that no moment has ever been as happy as the present one; but why," I asked, "why did you change your mind about marrying me? you like and trust me—and I ask no more!"

Florentine turned squarely in the carriage and looked me full in the eyes; her face was the color of poppy leaves but she spoke clearly and bravely.

"Because you are an honest man, Mr. Elliott; though poor, you and the women of your family, your mother—your sisters if you have any—all are honorable women?"

She paused as if for a reply.

"That is all!" she said stopping abruptly. "If I should tell you more you would stop the carriage—you would refuse to sit here by my side—you would leave me——"

"Stop!" I exclaimed, "not all the saints above could come down here and tell me——"

"Whoa! Whoa!" The brougham lurched to one side and stopped with a sharp bump.

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"What is the matter?" she cried.

"I will see!"

I stuck my head far out of the window in the drizzly black; the road was heavy and the night starless. There was no one to be seen but I could hear the stamping of the startled horses. Just as I was about to open the carriage door and step out to ascertain the cause of the disturbance, someone opened it from the outside and saved me the trouble. A hand apparently from nowhere was thrust out and at the same time something was thrust inside and the door was slammed with a bang. Simultaneously I uttered a yell.

"What's the matter?" cried Florentine, clasping me in the darkness. "Oh, are you hurt?"

"Nothing! A mere trifle! My foot!"

"What was it?"

But I didn't answer her for I had thrown the weight off my foot and was out of the carriage. I wanted to know who lurked in the road at that time of night. Nothing was to be seen; I ran, followed by the footman, down a narrow footpath which dropped suddenly into a ravine; I called, but there was no answer. Slowly searching each side of the path I retraced my steps to the carriage road. Florentine was leaning out of the door of the brougham.

"Do not go away again," she begged. "I am awfully frightened."

I wanted to explore further but her pale, beautiful face in its silver frame held me fascinated, and she needed me. I got back in the carriage and shut the door. Down at my feet was the great black bag which had been thrown into the carriage door, apparently

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right out of the depth of the night, smashing my foot in its descent. I got hold of the handle and tried to lift it.

"It weighs a hundred pounds," I said, tugging at it. "It's a wonder that the handle holds."

"Let me help," said Florentine, stripping off one of her long gloves and reaching down for a handle.

"I can manage it," I answered. "But where do you suppose it came from; and—and don't put your glove back on!" as she started to put her hand back in her glove.

"Where do you suppose?" she repeated wonderingly and letting her hand rest for a minute on mine.

It might have been cowardice upon my part, but, for some reason or other, I thought it prudent not to open the satchel at this minute. So I pushed it back under the seat, using both hands to do so.

Meanwhile the coachman, from his own volition, had started up his horses again.

CHAPTER VIII

A BULLET IN THE DARK

“**T**HAT is the most singular thing!” exclaimed Florentine. “What do you suppose it means?”

I would have been glad to tell her.

“Why do you not open it now?”

“Wait a little while,” I said.

She shivered, and I drew the silver fox closer around her shoulders; but she shook it off.

“Don’t mind me, but you are cold.” She touched my coat. “And you are wet; the rain beats in that window.”

Before I could stop her she had picked up the feather boa which she had brought with her, and which had fallen to her feet, and with quick turns she had twisted it around my neck. Then, with her pretty white hands, one soft and warm and bare and the other clothed in snow white kid, she knotted the big fluffy white feather thing upon my chest, tying it as she would have tied it on her own beautiful bosom.

I sat there and let her do it, though not accustomed to feathers. As she was tying it I remembered how, once upon a time—was it in a previous existence way back in Boston?—I was awakened in the night by my old Aunt Jane, who shook me and said there were burglars in the cellar. I grabbed my revolver and rushed

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downstairs and through the front basement to head them off. Of course I fell into the coal hole outside under the front stoop, for it wasn't burglars but only the cook trying to get in. But, in through the coal hole I went; and I remember how Aunt Jane threw down her shawl and told me to wrap it around my scantily attired shoulders until they could unlock the coal cellar and let me all the way through; and how I had indignantly tossed it back, preferring to freeze rather than die wrapped in a shawl.

Yet here I was, sitting in a closed carriage in June with that ridiculous white feather boa knotted on my chest, looking as proud as a pouter pigeon and as pleased as Punch.

"I am worrying about you," said the girl, as she gave another little touch to the boa; "I really am worrying, for the rain is coming in your window."

I leaned forward to close the window a little; the drizzle was certainly coming sharply my way; as I did so the ends of the boa fluttered in the sharp draught and I must have filled the window full, for I am not a slim man.

Whizz-zz!

Something cut the air sharply.

Whizz-zz!

Florentine grabbed my arm with both her hands but I noticed even then that she did not scream. The poor girl was nerved to any emergency.

"Lean back," I commanded sharply. "Get behind me if you can! There!"

I felt her slim form sinking helplessly back in the cushions. Then I choked, for the air was full of

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feathers. I coughed and put my hand to my chest. The feather boa was cut in two. In the opposite window were two sharp holes to show where the bullets had made their escape after they had plucked my feathers.

"Oh," moaned Florentine, "you are hurt."

"Lie perfectly still behind me," I ordered, "and do not lift your head as much as a single inch."

She obeyed, but I could feel her heart beating wildly. I leaned well forward upon the cushions to be sure that she could find room to shield herself behind me.

She must have perceived my attempt to protect her for, suddenly rallying from her momentary panic, she sat up and with the full force of her two small hands she pushed me back where she had been.

"I cannot let you risk your life for me."

At that moment there was another sharp sound in the air.

Whizz! another bullet rushed past us carrying a blur of feathers.

"Sit back," ordered Florentine sharply, as sharply as I had spoken to her before; "I brought you here and I refuse to let you get murdered for my sake. It is my fault, I might have known they would not let you have me——" She took one side of her heavy cloak and threw it across me. "Lean back, this cloak will shield us both."

The cloak tore at the lilies and they fell in her lap, crushed and broken.

"I would give my life if I had not brought you here," she sobbed.

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Some flowers, some natures, some people give forth their best when bruised; at this trying moment the unselfishness in her came swiftly to the surface.

"Shall you ever forgive me?"

I could not record my answer now if I tried. But I know that I took off the cloak and forced it around her and that I put her back upon the seat where she should have been; and she sat so still and so white that she frightened me.

Never, if I live to be a thousand, and I'm willing to live that long in spite of the memory of that night, shall I forget the remainder of that drive. It seems that something went wrong with the harness and we were held for a while in the middle of the road, and, during that halt, I suffered the tortures of a man who sees danger menacing the thing he loves; it is an agony compared to which the mediæval rack was a merry-go-round.

She could not help noticing my uneasiness, which was all the more acute from powerlessness to act and, by keeping her own self-control, she did what she could to reassure me.

We had entered now upon the last mile of the drive and were in the dense woods that surround Wentstone Castle. After a while I let Florentine rise from her cramped position though I kept her well out of possible range. She was very brave and was evidently trying hard not to mention the pistol shot.

"Please—please talk," she begged faintly.

"Beautiful woods!" was my utterly inane remark. I once heard of a woman who was shipwrecked and all she could think of to say was "Nice big rock." She

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said afterwards that the experience had driven her back into the mental attitude of a child of two years.

But Florentine was getting her nerve and I was corraling mine.

"My father would never allow these trees to be cut," went on Florentine, steadying her voice and trying to keep me from noticing the tremble in it. "And Uncle Henry has preserved them. Uncle Henry is Aunt Hope's husband," she added explanatorily.

She was sitting up now, plucky but pale, and I was reassuring her and trying to lead her mind in another direction. For strategic reasons I still kept the boa around my neck; for, though not possessed of a passion for collecting bullets in my chest, I preferred to be the monopolist of them on this occasion. If any stray balls were floating around I wanted to catch them first so they would become acclimated to human flesh before Florentine got them.

"That awful pistol!" she murmured, getting back to it.

"Don't talk about it until we are out of the woods."

I would have given almost anything for a good chance at my assailant at just that moment. But not being able to conjure up one I thought it advisable to do the next best thing, sit still and wait. The carriage hardly crawled along; but I would gain nothing by stepping out into the road and getting shot.

"Who fired the bullet?" she asked, still trembling and unable to get away from the subject.

"I don't know, but I'm going to find out the minute I get you safely housed in Wentstone Castle," I said.

"Oh p-please don't," she begged.

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A deep shiver went over her.

"And please do look in that satchel now. I think we ought to know what is in it."

I thought so, too. So, avoiding the window as well as I could, I dragged the black bag from under the seat. It sprang open almost at a touch.

"Whew!" I exclaimed, giving a Yankee whistle.

Florentine did not speak but she gazed into the bag as if fascinated. There, even in the dusk of the carriage lamps, we saw plainly before us as complete a set of murderous tools as was ever spread before the eye of mortal crook. It was as if a burglar had robbed himself to make us a wedding present. There was his bottle of chloroform. It must have oozed out for a faint sweet odor issued from the bag; and there was a revolver; I secured this at once, slipping it into my hip pocket and thanking my stars. Then there were skeleton things of which I vaguely knew the meaning and there was a jimmy and a wrench.

"Some workman will find himself without his tools to-night," I observed, as I examined the contents of the bag again.

"But who do you suppose could have thrown them into this carriage?"

"I'm afraid it wasn't a fairy godmother."

We said no more but I noticed that the color did not come back to Florentine's face until we saw the distantly burning lights of Wentstone Castle shining through the trees.

"Not a word of this to anybody," I cautioned her. "We don't want to hurt our case. And we're going to carry out our agreement in spite of flying lead."

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She nodded assent; as for me, my feathers might be shaken but not my determination; it is an heirloom.

CHAPTER IX

THE TOILS OF SIR CHARLES

“**I** SUPPOSE, before we get there,” said Florentine, “that I must tell you about Aunt Hope. We shall see her immediately and she has her traits. And—you’ll have to know about the Sepoy girl; she is our family skeleton.”

“Let me hear the bones rattle,” I answered encouragingly.

And then she told me. It was an odd story of how Lady Hope had had political ambitions for Uncle Henry and had “stumped” for him. But with the English tenantry the word of a childless woman has no weight. So Aunt Hope telegraphed home to Uncle Henry to adopt a child at once. Uncle Henry, busy with his painting, sent to an orphan asylum and took the first baby offered. It happened to be a native of India, a little orphaned Sepoy child. And Aunt Hope was laughed off the stage when, without having previously seen it, she had it brought on as hers.”

“What became of the Sepoy baby?” I questioned after I had had my laugh at Aunt Hope’s expense.

“Oh, it had been legally adopted, so Aunt Hope had to keep it. It grew up and is a woman now. It happened considerably over twenty years ago. You will see her to-night and that is one of the reasons why I wanted to explain. Aunt Hope sent her back to India

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one time when Cousin Charles was going, and she had grown up, but she would not stay. You will see her in her native Indian costume; and of course she is more or less one of the family, as she is legally Aunt Hope's daughter."

"How old is Aunt Hope?" I asked, as I wanted to be posted on details.

"She is sixty-one but she looks much younger for her years than Aunt Charity."

"How old is Aunt Charity?"

"She is sixty-one."

I didn't quite understand and I admitted it.

"Aunt Faith, Aunt Hope and Aunt Charity are all three sixty-one years old. They are triplets."

"Ah yes, I remember."

The story of their birth as told me a week ago by the aged Duchess of Hume sprang to my mind and I wondered if Florentine had ever heard of it. She was leaning back in the carriage with closed eyes while the horses trotted splashily along.

"We ought to be nearly there," I observed, for lack of anything more brilliant to say. "I wonder if they will be surprised to see us."

"Oh, no, because I sent them word that I was coming," she said, waking and brightening. "Oh—what was that?"

There was a note of quick alarm in her voice; a shadow had crossed the pane.

"Oh—oh!" cried Florentine, putting her head out of the window—"Do—look!"

I stuck out my head alongside hers in time to see a fleeing figure.

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"Who is it?" I demanded stupidly.

Florentine cried, still leaning from the window. "Oh, he is so exactly like you; the very image—face—figure——"

I had seen enough, but I tried to soothe her.

"You are overwrought and nervous; it is your fancy."

"No, no! Your face, your features, all; and he looked right into the carriage; his eyes were not a yard from mine."

I still tried to quiet her but she was intensely agitated.

"I never saw two people so alike; he was broad and just your height and his face was feature for feature——"

"Poor devil!" I tried to laugh it off as though it were the hobgoblin of a child. But I had beheld the flying shadow and I was upset myself.

She did what she could to restore her own calm but it was some minutes before she stopped trembling.

"What did he want?" she asked, "and why did he stare so hard at you?"

"He merely wanted to compare features," I replied.

"And why should there be—how is there—a man looking just like you in these woods to-night?"

I replied flippantly, as men do to mask their fears from those they love; but I knew—just as she knew—that there had disappeared into the woods a man so like me that only my guardian angel could have told us apart.

"It may have been one of the workmen on the place and the likeness——"

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"No!" she struck in; "I know them all and they know me!"

"Then a man from one of the adjoining places——"

"No——!"

It was a mystery unsolved and strange to say it weighed upon us as no preceding happening had done.

"I hope they will welcome us in spite of the hour," I remarked as though there had been no shadow.

"No fear of that," she said, steadying her voice, "for I can assure you that my dear old aunts have been nervous enough lest I forfeit the legacy. But they did not—to do them justice—want me to marry Cousin Charles against whom they have many grievances. For one thing they hate him soundly for having cheated them out of much of their fortune."

"It is a trick which the victim seldom applauds. There's a hansom in front of the door," I observed, peering ahead.

"Oh that's Mr. Bradstreet, the lawyer," she explained, looking out. "He is here to arrange matters. You see it is necessary to obtain his consent to our marriage; also the written consent of the aunts."

We were approaching the broad stone steps that led to the wide entrance of the Castle in the Woods, and Florentine's forehead had taken an anxious pucker.

"I think you better stay in the carriage," said she, "until I can go in and explain——"

My wits came to the rescue and I suddenly remembered, that while the Ladies Faith, Hope and Charity were expecting Florentine to come and bring a bridegroom, they did not know who the bridegroom might

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be. So, at the very best, my appearance would be in the nature of a surprise to them.

"Stay," said Florentine, who was proving herself a practical little girl, "I must go ahead and tell them."

"Why not let me speak for myself?"

She smiled the same weary little smile. "It is such a distressing situation I could hardly explain it now even if I were not so tired. All three of the sisters—and Aunt Hope's husband, Uncle Henry—are terribly in debt to Cousin Charles. He led them into his investing schemes, and then, I honestly believe, cheated them out of their money. My fortune—if I get married by to-morrow night—will put us all out of his reach."

"Then why not——"

"You stay in the carriage and wait until I come for you," she whispered as I helped her out. She smiled but I noticed that her eyes wandered back along the road as though she feared something or somebody.

"I can't let you go again," I cried.

She ran back, her face paling a little and the youthful look gone. "I'll come back—this time," she whispered. "But—are you sure you are not afraid of—the dreadful secret—the one—which Aunt Faith told me—for the first time—to-night?"

"I shall never ask to hear it," I replied recklessly.

To stay back in the cave and wait while the lady goes ahead and fights your dragon for you isn't strictly in line with the professed valor of the knight-errant. But there was nothing else for me to do; so, feeling like a chump, I climbed back in the carriage and mopped my chin, for the bullet had pinged it a little

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and my forehead smarted as though grazed by lead.

I saw Florentine's silken drapery disappear inside the door. Then I leaned forward and felt the bullet holes in the glass; I also secured the black bag, for I wasn't going to leave it behind me to make a scandal in the Castle. Even if I were not acceptable to them I did not want them to think they had entertained a burglar.

In what seemed an incredibly long time a servant came down and opened the carriage door. I took it for the signal and got out and walked up the stone steps; the broad door swung open and I stepped inside, into the broad candlelight of Wentstone Castle! Florentine met me as the maid-servant was taking my top coat.

"I didn't come out," she said, "but I sent the servant for you. They have partially consented as time is now so valuable, on condition that I get a divorce from you directly after the marriage."

I interrupted her to ask a question.

"Upon what grounds do you intend to get a divorce?"

"Undue influence brought to bear!"

"Ah," I murmured, but the look that was as pleased as Punch was no longer upon my face.

"They want to see you first," she whispered, "before they will give their full consent."

I squeezed her hand by way of reassurance. "They shall see me."

I was beginning to feel the spirit of the fray; the daring which comes to a man when he is fighting for his family and his fireside.

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Florentine stepped into the great room on the right and I followed her. It was the state drawing-room of the castle and I noted, though my eye was not searching specially for furnishings, that it was filled with magnificent specimens of mahogany and gilt of a by-gone day. So full was it of furniture that, to my eyes, it was curiously reminiscent of a Fifth Avenue antique shop. Drawing-rooms to me reflect the character of the inmates of the house and I could judge the antediluvian fussiness of the ladies of Wentstone by the antiquated surroundings.

In the middle of this great room, standing in a soft lake of purple silk, stood Aunt Hope. I knew her at once by the description I had had of her. She was very tall, very thin and upon her face there were written the lines of a swiftly spent life. Social ambition marked the creases in her much powdered countenance and family pride stamped each puff upon her much be-dressed head. She was evidently the social arbiter of her family.

"Aunt Hope, this is Mr. Roman Elliott," said Florentine, leading me to her and aiming her most winning smile at the old lady. Aunt Hope bowed stiffly, but her bony and be-ringed hands did not move. She was taking stock of me before committing herself.

"Where is Aunt Charity?" asked Florentine.

"Sister Charity!" called Aunt Hope, "come here. We want you!"

Out of the rear end of the deep drawing-room came Aunt Charity. She was built in complete contrast to the others of the triplets for she was short, dark and sallow. She was of the type which we might call little

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and dried up. But I forgave Aunt Charity, for she came forward holding out her hand to me. It was her left hand, for in her right she carried her Bible, so that she really had to use her left hand.

"Charity, lay down your Bible for once," exclaimed Aunt Hope impatiently, "and listen to me!"

"Now, Hope," remonstrated Aunt Charity, "you know how impossible it is for me to remain long. I must read ten chapters before I go to bed, if I'm going to get through the Bible before Mr. Sanction's anniversary."

Florentine turned half round so that she could speak into my ear. "The thirtieth anniversary of Mr. Sanction's death occurs next Thursday and Aunt Charity is going to make him a present of another reading through of her Bible. She is reading now for the word Deceit."

"What will she do with it?" I asked.

"She will write him a letter telling him how many times she has found the word in the Bible."

"And where will she put the letter?" I asked, merely to become posted upon the subject of posthumous correspondence.

"Oh, she will take it out to his grave and bury it. She has done it regularly for thirty years."

Aunt Charity's tart voice was still upon the air.

"I shall be present at this marriage in case I approve. But I doubt very much if I will give my consent."

"The Rev. Mr. Sanction was gifted with language," hinted Florentine.

I straightened my shoulders and prepared to use

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language. From the dining-room Aunt Hope brought in the family lawyer, Mr. Bradstreet, as old as the best antique in the room, and we made our preparations.

"We can't go on until Faith comes," declared Aunt Hope, going to the window and looking out. "She is at her town house," she explained to me, "and she half expected a guest for dinner this evening. However, she'll be here in a little while."

I could have told her that I had interviewed Aunt Faith in town and that the dinner guest hadn't come; also that Aunt Faith would follow very shortly indeed. Even at that moment there was a rumbling of carriage wheels outside and a few minutes later Aunt Faith bustled in. I had a chance now to see them all together, the three Graces, Faith, Hope and Charity, while, in the background stood old Mr. Bradstreet ready to aid and abet.

Introductions flew around pretty generally, and I was preparing to make my speech, when Aunt Hope suddenly cried:

"Wait! We must have your Uncle Henry. Henry is an artist," she explained proudly.

This remark must have been for my benefit as the rest knew—or didn't know—it; so a servant was dispatched to look up the artistic Uncle Henry. I walked around the room cogitating as to my best course of procedure and chanced to be by the hall door just in time to meet the servant coming in. It was the girl who had taken my coat and I had tipped her, which might account for her willingness to exchange conversation with me.

THE STAIRWAY ON THE WALL

"Sir Henry can't come, sir," she said, "he's busy making a bath tub, and then he's got to eat his dinner."

"Making a bath tub!" I exclaimed. "Is Sir Henry a plumber?"

"Oh, no, sir," said the girl, "he's a painter and he wants to put the bath tub in the picture before he goes to bed. Then he's got to have his dinner."

"Didn't he dine with the rest of the family?" I asked.

"No, sir. He never eats with the rest of the family. You see, sir, he's a vegetable. He lives on butter-nuts and water cress."

"Indeed!"

I went back into the drawing-room with the idea that I had a job before me if I was to reconcile such a variety of personalities to the idea of taking any one person into hearth and home. But, on the other hand, there was the money; and I could faintly scent that money was a little shy in that family.

Uncle Henry came down a few minutes later. I saw at once that he was the junior of Aunt Hope and that he aspired to live up to his reputation of being a painter. His velvet coat, cloth slippers, butcher's apron, and the palette sticking on his left thumb, told me as much.

He pulled me on one side, as soon as I had been introduced. "When this dreary function is over," he said, "I would be glad to have you come up to my studio. I'm painting a picture——"

Here he gave me a look of great expectancy and I tried to look enthralled with anticipation.

THE TOILS OF SIR CHARLES

"You're interested. Ah, I knew you would be; it is a picture that is to hang in the ladies' gymnasium and swimming baths which Florentine is going to donate to the parish."

I could see where some of Florentine's fortune was to go.

"The swimming pool isn't ready yet, but it will be by the time my picture is done."

Eagerly I asked the title of the picture—the subject.

Uncle Henry's face glowed with pleasure. I had made a hit, and had secured an ally.

"It's partly allegorical; partly illustrative," he said, "and it is taken from somewhere in the Old Testament, Kings, I think."

A picture taken from Kings promised to be interesting and I pressed him to know more.

"It's for the swimming pool you know," confided he; "so I've painted a bath tub. In the distance is King David walking on the house-top and in the foreground is the wife of Uriah the Hittite, taking a bath. You know David fell in love with her—then, wasn't it—eh?"

I confessed that I didn't remember.

"Well, you think it's an artistic subject for the wall of a parish house swimming pool, anyway, don't you?" he questioned anxiously.

Maybe I did and maybe I didn't, but I wasn't going to say, so I nodded and shook his hand. Aunt Hope was calling us and we returned to the drawing-room.

"They are a little opposed," whispered Florentine nervously, "and I have told them that you will ex-

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plain matters. Don't say too much, but I think you'll have to pretend that you're in love with me for they're all great believers in real love. Can you do it, do you suppose; for, though they are determined that I shall be married, they want me to marry an Englishman or someone in—in their set! Even Sir Charles would be better than an American."

I glanced at her crimson cheeks and made a hasty decision.

"See here," I said, taking her arm and leading her off behind the window curtains, a movement easily understood in a man about to marry his lady love, "before we go on with this ridiculous farce I have something to say for myself. I may not be a Hadley of England, but I'm an Elliott of Boston; and I'm a man in love. And when my time comes to speak to these old ladies, these aunts of yours, I'm going to do my best to win them over. But, if I don't succeed, it isn't going to make one bit of difference—to either you or me. You're not going to marry Sir Charles, and he can't get you if he comes here in the morning with a sheriff's posse."

Florentine looked frightened.

"I'll keep my part. I'll take possession of your promise to love, honor and obey, and no more; I'll hand back the promise intact; but old ladies or no old ladies, I am going to marry you to-night according to our arrangement. I am not a puppet here to be sent away if they don't like my looks. I am here as a man who wants to marry the woman he loves—yes, the woman he loves!—and I'm going to do it, too; if she

THE TOILS OF SIR CHARLES

doesn't love me enough to cherish and keep, or whatever it is, why, that's an afterthought!"

Considering that I am well known for my eloquence in the Court House at home, my speech sounded very flat and tame, but a man can't be expected to do much with his tongue when his heart is in his mouth.

"I'm afraid you don't understand that I can't marry you unless they are willing. The money does not come to me without their agreement in writing——"

"Let the money go," I broke in. "We do not have to get the consent of anyone. We can get married to-night and ask their permission afterwards. They will be glad enough to give it when they see their fortune disappearing—for you can give it all to them, if you want to, afterwards. Or, if they don't give their consent we can let the fortune go—back to Montana!"

I looked her right in the face and she knew; she knew I loved her; I had nailed my flag to the mast; my colors were in the breeze.

"I—I believe I am more than half in love with you," she said. "If—if I were free—perfectly free—I half believe I'd marry you anyway."

"Make it three-quarters or I'll refuse to make any speech at all this evening."

"Well—three-quarters, if you wish it, Mr.—Roman Elliott of Boston. And I'm not sorry you are poor; and I don't care if you do work for a living."

Extraordinary admission for a girl brought up as she had been. I looked at her squarely and she gave me gaze for gaze.

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"But we've got to play our parts; you must get the consent of Aunt Faith, Aunt Hope and Aunt Charity, for, remember—reckless fellow—that there's a fortune thrown away if I'm not married by this time tomorrow. And we, our family, must have money. I'm—I'm awfully poor."

Perhaps it was the fortune, and perhaps it was not, that made me turn so readily toward the little group that stood consulting alongside the piano. In the doorway the servants had gathered and Aunt Hope went to close them out. But, as she shut the door in the face of the others, I noticed that she pulled one inside. This woman who impressed me at sight as a sort of upper servant, a combination of servant and companion, was so curiously attired that I could not help staring at her.

"Oh, that's the Sepoy girl Aunt Hope adopted," whispered Florentine. "She clings, you see, to her native costume. Aunt Hope tried to keep her in India, but she comes back—when Cousin Charles is here."

In answer to my unspoken question she added:

"She is quite devoted to him. Aunt Hope sent her out to India in his care when she was quite a girl and ever since then—you know—I told you—how she follows him."

CHAPTER X

THE REV. MR. PANCOAST IS MISSING

MR. BRADSTREET was clearing his throat and there was no time for more; the old family lawyer was speaking:

"I understand from these ladies, my clients," said he, standing squarely with hands behind him, and talking as though he were addressing a courtroom, "that you have pretensions for the hand of the Honorable Florentine Hadley. According to the will of her second cousin the consent of her aunts must be obtained. The hour is late and it is imperative that the matter be attended to now, as, according to the terms of the will, the marriage must take place before the Honorable Florentine has attained her twenty-first birthday, which will be to-morrow night. Owing to certain engagements and possible interruptions,"—everybody thought of Sir Charles—"we think it expedient that it be gone through with at once. Now, Mr. Elliott, you are a stranger to us, though well introduced in London I hear, but just the same, we would like to have you present your case; we want to know something about you!"

I stepped out into the middle of the floor and Florentine, plucky girl, came over and stood by my side. The little audience took us in from head to foot. I don't know how I looked, but as for Florentine, never

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have I seen a lovelier—a more distracting sight. I did not dare to let my eyes rest upon her; from the chandelier of candles above us the soft lights fell down upon her hair, turning each silver thread into gleaming gold. That searching upper lighting which annihilates most women only served as a torch to show up Florentine's wonderful beauty. It seemed impossible that she should be there by the side of me. She ought to have been in Heaven on a pink cloud, yet there she stood with downcast eyes, wondering what I could say. I looked at her and knew what I would say!

Aunt Faith, Aunt Hope and Aunt Charity stood in a row, side by side; and back of them stood Mr. Bradstreet. All eyes were, of course, upon me and the dull black cover of Aunt Charity's Oxford Bible danced before me. In the doorway, patiently waiting to be allowed to go back to his bath tub, stood Uncle Henry.

Florentine gave a tiny cough which I took for a signal that I was to begin and I opened my mouth and I spoke. I don't know now just exactly what I said, but Florentine declared afterwards that it was the finest burst of eloquence she ever heard; certainly it reduced all three sisters to tears. Aunt Hope mopped her eyes at the first onslaught, but it was not until I touched upon the unexpected advent of Prince Charming into the life of Florentine—cunningly intimating that I was Prince Charming—that Aunt Faith succumbed. Then came Aunt Charity's turn, but she had an obdurate look in her snappy little black eyes; I reached out my hand for her Bible, and,

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for a minute, I thought she was going to give it to me. But she held on and I let my hand drop. But I spoke Scripture, spouting it as though I had read it through twice a year for the past four decades, and I know now that Aunt Charity could not have done better herself.

I hinged the whole thing on my love for Florentine And, when I got to the critical stage of the proceeding, I stopped short, leaving silence to work out the rest. Then I bent down my head and whispered to Florentine, "Was it all right?"

"Ye-es, but—I think you really ought to kiss—me. Would you mind?"

Aunt Faith was crying and Aunt Charity had winked off two big tears.

"Would I mind?"

I grabbed hold of her with both arms and gave her a good hug. Then I lifted her face to mine and—well, maybe I overdid the matter a little, for she wriggled herself free:

"You brute—you horrid thing!" she exclaimed, as loud as she dared, "You wretch—I'll never, never speak to you again!"

"What did I do?" I whispered back. "You asked me to!"

"Do! You—you haven't been shaved for a—a week!"

She buried her face in her handkerchief.

"Haven't been shaved—for a week!" I gasped.

This was a pretty state of affairs, a manifest injustice and a case of rank ingratitude. Hadn't been

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shaved for a week! My Japanese valet would have left me without notice if he had heard.

The three Graces and Mr. Bradstreet had gone into executive session and we were unobserved.

I looked at Florentine. The tip of one ear, pink and impenitent, showed above the tiny lace absurdity with which she was soothing her cheek; something must be done. Florentine was going to be my wife; that was certain. But I wanted an agreeable wife, not a vixen; a reasonable one, not a shrew.

And here she was on the very day of our marriage, our wedding day, calling me names and libeling me to my face, just because I had kissed her perhaps a little too enthusiastically. It must be stopped at once—not the kissing, but the libel. Suppose I were to let this—this insult—pass, what would happen? to what would it lead? I glanced at her again. She was touching her nose with the bit of lace; I never noticed before how saucy a tilt a perfect little Grecian nose can take. She glanced sideways and actually sniffed at me.

“I said you might take *one*; you took seventeen!”

“Seventeen! I’ll swear it was only——”

I stopped right there; suppose I did take seventeen; what of it, and why not? A pretty circumstance if I could not kiss my own wife seventeen kisses.

My mind traveled ahead into that future far beyond the old drawing-room and its assembled antiques; far away into a world of at least Florentine and me. And I could not kiss her! No, it would not do; she must be disciplined and now; it was the time to teach her to respect a husband.

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I looked at the lovely pink and silver image by my side; she had said, "You haven't been shaved for a week!" And a wife should be taught the unpopularity of such an accusation. Her profile was turned from me, but oh, how pretty she was! One must not be too severe after all; so I bent and whispered:

"I would not say such a thing to you."

She buried her face in her handkerchief.

"Forgive me," I begged, "forgive me—I didn't mean it—of course I would——"

Her shoulders shook; she was laughing. *She was laughing.* Such a wife would be impervious to discipline.

I looked across the room. Aunt Faith was still wiping her eyes and thinking of Prince Charming; Aunt Hope had her hand on Uncle Henry's shoulder and was as near him as the paint palette on his thumb would permit.

But Aunt Charity's beady eyes were upon me.

"I wish to speak," she declared.

"Charity!" interposed Aunt Hope.

"It is best to utter my sentiments—our sentiments—now," she continued. "There are things which should be told."

Florentine gave a little gasp and turned white.

"I do not want to hear them; that is, they are already known to me," I volunteered.

"I do not believe it," said Aunt Charity calmly, "and there is no lie as wicked as a deliberate lie."

"Charity," remonstrated Aunt Faith.

But Aunt Charity was not to be stopped.

"We have this day, only," she resumed, "come into

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certain information regarding our niece, the Honorable Florentine Hadley. Up to this time we had supposed her to be a suitable match for any title in England."

"Oh, Aunt Charity," pleaded Florentine.

"She is far too good for most of your titles," I ejaculated, "and I will not hear more."

"But to-day, for the first time," went on the implacable Charity, "we are placed in possession of information which, if true—and Sister Faith says that Cousin Charles proved it to her—makes our niece unfit, unworthy; in other words, Mr. Elliott, only a nobody like yourself would marry her."

"You are a demon, and I wouldn't believe you or Sir Charles under oath," were some of the foolish words I uttered, but they were fortunately drowned out by Florentine's voice.

"Don't—I beg—Aunt Charity," sobbed she. She had hidden her face in her hands and was weeping with a violence and an abandon that unnerved my very soul.

"You might as well face it," said the relentless Charity. "She is—degraded."

"Stop," I cried.

"Yet her cousin, Sir Charles, forgetting his proud position as head of our family, is willing to stoop to marry her."

It was well she spoke his name, for at mention of Sir Charles, Florentine flung her head proudly up.

"I refuse to accept his sacrifice!" she declared.

"And I don't care for Sir Charles, nor for all his documentary evidence," I exclaimed.

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My tone was a little more threatening than I intended, and Charity subsided; but I was quite willing to forgive myself any rudeness if it had the effect of shutting her up.

Florentine was the first to find her voice.

"I will not marry Mr. Elliott or anyone else," she ejaculated.

A dead silence fell, broken by Aunt Faith.

"The Rev. Mr. Pancoast is on his way here—to perform the ceremony."

"He can return," said Florentine hotly. Then, as her eyes fell on my own face flushed and indignant, she became more calm. "Isn't he a long time?" she asked.

"Do not libel Jephtha's Daughter," I reminded her, and then I remembered that he ought to be here, even if Jephtha's Daughter had stopped and lain down for a beauty sleep.

Cousin Irene—it seemed a thousand ages ago—had told me about the beauty sleep as known in Boston. She said it was unnecessary if a woman wears square toed shoes and counts her proteids, but Cousin Irene isn't an old horse.

Aunt Charity still had the floor.

"Perhaps I better go and search for him," I said, ignoring her. It is pretty dark down that winding road and——"

Suppose the Rev. Mr. Pancoast should have encountered the difficulties which had beset us—in our journey through the woods of Wentstone!

Florentine and I looked at each other; we were both so wrought up that the littles worried us.

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"There is a piece of skin off your forehead," said she, "and there's blood on your handkerchief."

"Oh, that's where one of those bullets pinked me," I replied easily, "but it wasn't more than a graze; it matches the one on my chin."

"I wonder what has become of Mr. Pancoast?" she repeated.

"I'm going to look for him."

Florentine nodded, but the anxious look came back into her face.

"You are willing to let him marry us?" I asked.

After some talk I drew out of her that she was willing but feared that Sir Charles would murder me; it was plain that the poor girl—though she knew her own mind—was rent by conflicting emotions.

CHAPTER XI

A MYSTERY AT MIDNIGHT

I TURNED to the Graces and explained matters and they were for sending the old manservant down the road to look for the clergyman.

But to this I objected.

"The carriage is waiting," I said, "and I will drive down and find him. He is probably not far away."

I slipped into my coat and had my hand on the door knob when Florentine touched me on the arm.

"I can't bear to have you go, but if you do go, I want to go with you." She picked up her cloak, "I really do, and I am going."

Seeing my face, she put both hands timidly on my arm:

"Don't refuse me. I can't let you go alone—I shall worry so, because I am responsible for having brought you here."

It was against my judgment, but with her still clinging to my arm, I opened the door. A swift wind blew out the candles in the chandelier and I put my arm around Florentine to steady her. The rain had stopped and the stars were winking forth but it was chilly.

I looked at the foot of the steps for the carriage but it was not there; I whistled, but it did not appear.

"He must have gone," I chattered, for the wind

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went through us. "Never mind, the road is a short one and I can run down and back in half an hour. But you must stay here. And I will take that black bag of burglar's tools—it seems awkward to leave it here with you."

"But what will you do with it?"

"Leave it in the woods—to be called for by the rightful—or the wrongful—owners."

Florentine agreed and I opened the big door and put her back in the house. As it was closing, she stuck her head out—and this time she didn't have to *ask* me!

I started whistling down the winding road. A few yards from the house it took an abrupt turn so that the house disappeared except for the windows which looked like squares of yellow light shining through the trees. It was not until I had made the turn that I noticed the weight of the black bag in my hand. The road led slightly downward and I quickened my pace to a run for I thought of Florentine and her natural misgivings after our experiences in these same woods that night.

Even as I hurried along I was conscious of the feeling that for the first time in my life I knew what it was to live in two worlds—a woman's world and a man's. I turned and looked back at the Castle; the squares of yellow were faintly visible and against one of them I thought I saw Florentine's face silhouetted, and she was worrying about me. This would not do; I must shake it off; the thought of Florentine took away my courage and made me long to turn and rush back to her.

A MYSTERY AT MIDNIGHT

I stumbled ahead over the road which was poor. The weakened finances of the family had allowed it to get into sad disrepair. I stepped into a hole, regained my footing and stumbled again! Again I tripped on something—was it a rope? and, while I was trying to catch myself, I tripped again and this time I fell flat on my face—stretched full across something that filled the road.

I felt myself grasping a warm body. I stretched out my hands and they touched something all rough and hairy like a skin rug. I rolled awkwardly off and struggled to my feet, slipping in a soft and sticky pool. By chance I found a match in the pocket of my dress coat and I struck it and looked around. The flame wavered in the wind but I coaxed it.

At my feet lay that over which I had fallen, a great bay horse, and I was wading in a puddle of dark red blood. I tried to take a step but the reins in which I had stumbled were tangled around my ankles.

I struck the horse with my fist in the hope that a movement would help me to extricate myself from the tangle of reins in which I had become unwittingly twisted; there was no motion; I lifted its head, tugging at the mane, but it fell back heavily. The horse was old and the story of Jephtha's Daughter flashed through my mind, as I shaded my eyes to look at the animal while I worked myself loose from the lines.

There was a dark object beyond, and groping my way to it, I found it to be an overturned buggy which had been pitched violently on its side so that it blocked the road. "Jephtha's Daughter did not die

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without a struggle," I said, as I saw the shattered top.

I had no more matches, but I peered into the buggy as best I could. There, half lying on the ground and half pinned under the wheels lay a person.

It was an old man, his face turned sharply upward.

Was he alive? I pulled at his arms, but I could not free him, his legs were caught fast underneath, as though he had been getting out of the buggy when it overturned. I exerted all my strength to raise it but it was a hopeless task.

In the road ahead lay a great white stone and I ran to fetch it, half rolling and half carrying it to the buggy. With tremendous effort I tried now to lift the wagon upon it, but the wheels rolled backward, sending the old man's shoulders heavily to the ground. I looked around for a pole to use as a lever but none was in sight. Then, for the first time, I thought of the black bag. In it were the heavy burglar's tools—at which Florentine had had one horrified glance—and among these were surely some that would be of use to me now! I felt devoutly grateful that I had brought it.

I looked around for the bag. It had fallen out of my hand when I stumbled over the horse and its contents lay scattered in the road. I searched around. There was a jimmy, a knife, a lantern and, yes, the very article I wanted for leverage, an iron bar. There was also a flask of whiskey.

I slipped the stout little iron bar under the buggy, braced it against the stone as a fulcrum, and leaned my weight upon it. Slowly it lifted and I put the

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wrench underneath, fixing it crudely but firmly, so as to hold the buggy up. I was panting now from the exertion but, looking underneath, I had the satisfaction of seeing that I would be able to free the old man from its weight, for he had not, after all, been pinned under the heaviest part of the wagon but rather held down by its broken and torn old sides.

I searched my pockets for another match—by what ill luck was I in a dress suit when I had a highway-man's work to do?—and yes, here was one! I struck it and the light flashed up. I picked up the flask, unscrewed the top and leaned forward with it in my hand. A drop trickled into the old man's mouth.

I lifted my head to take a breath and—crash! From the back there came a blow that set my head spinning. I fell forward and I could feel the whiskey or was it blood trickling over my hands? Crack! Another blow! But it did not stun me for I was on my feet in a second, striking out to right and left. I was in the midst of a *melée*; a crowd of men seemed to have come mysteriously from somewhere. There was no time for fighting tactics for they were closing in around me and I was being showered with blows. The stars seemed to have gone under but I could see darting, shadowy forms in the blackness and, even in my dizziness, I heard voices as I charged among them, splintering arms and jaws. The road was full and there were lanterns flashing and loud cries were in the air.

I do not know how long the combat lasted but I know that there were many lying in the road and that my fists were lame and swollen for days afterwards.

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A blow on the tip of the chin sent my head backward and I felt my wrists clutched. With a quick jerk I freed them and grabbed the arms of my assailant. The man was bigger than I, but I had his arms pinned to his side and was pushing him backwards. If I could twist his right wrist I would put him out of the fighting and there would be one less. We grappled and I forced him backward. He hit forward at me with his head and I handed him an uppercut that sent him down. He gave a cry and at that moment, a shrill whistle cut the air, to be answered by another whistle in the distance.

I could not look as I was rushing my man backward and we were near the edge of the road where it dropped into a ravine, yet I could feel that he was gaining upon me.

What would have happened next I do not know, but a flash of light blinded me, and, simultaneously, I felt my arms grabbed and pinioned to my sides while around my ankles there was thrown something that held them fast.

"Hold him, hold him!" I heard some one shout; and then came a confusion of cries and whistles, out of which a loud, harsh, rasping voice made itself heard.

"You can see for yourself, Constable," rasped the voice, "that I caught him in the act; came up just in the nick of time."

"What's all this?" demanded the Constable, throwing his light in my face, and directing his question at me.

"Ask him, he evidently knows more about it than

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I do," I muttered, gasping and trying to get my mental bearings.

"We caught him in the act of murdering this old man and adding robbery to his crime. That's enough to hang him without any more."

"That's a lie, I was——"

"Bind him tight," interrupted the man, "he's desperate."

I was indeed in a desperate state but not in exactly the way my aggressor intimated. My head was dizzy and the pain in my right arm was stinging. The ropes cut my wrists and my ankles were bound with more energy than human kindness.

The rasping voice, evidently that of the leader, spoke again:

"I was passing here with some of the servants from the Castle when I heard sounds of a struggle, we ran in this direction and arrived just as this ruffian was rifling the pockets of this old man, who was already dead as you see him now—stone dead!"

"Who is this man?" asked the Constable, stooping down and lifting the fallen head.

"No use asking about him now," exclaimed my accuser. "He's dead; done for, murdered! Fortunately I caught the murderer before he got away. I'll wager a gold coin he intended to rob the Castle afterwards, and maybe, murder us all in our beds."

The tone was familiar and I was coming out of my daze. My head was gradually clearing and I realized that I had heard the voice before and that very evening. I leaned forward and looked into the face of the man standing so near me, making a big hateful

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shadow in the night; yes, I was not mistaken; I knew him! It was Sir Charles and upon his countenance there was a worse look than it had been my ill fortune to see before.

"What does this mean, you blackguard?" I shouted at him. "You know you are lying—that every word is a falsehood."

He jumped to one side but the cords on my arms held.

"What does this mean?" I repeated, looking at the Constable and speaking more collectedly. "I was walking hurriedly along the road when I stumbled over an object. I stooped to examine it, and, the next moment, I was surrounded and attacked; and, now, I am in the hands of the law, accused of murder."

The Constable looked thick-headedly at Sir Charles as though expecting him to prompt an answer.

"That's a likely tale," sneered the nobleman.

"Ask him what he is doing out here in the woods with the servants from the Castle, at this hour of the night," I exclaimed.

"Ask him what he is doing here with that big black bag," demanded Sir Charles, picking up the jimmy and indicating the other scattered weapons.

Luckily, thought I, he does not know that I have the pistol in my pocket, where I had slipped it when Florentine and I had opened the bag in the cab; and, to tell the truth, I had forgotten it myself.

Sir Charles turned his head sideways and smiled his crooked smile.

CHAPTER XII

SIR CHARLES IS DISCONCERTED

“**A** COLD-BLOODED and high-handed proceeding,” exclaimed some one in the crowd.

“Cold-blooded! I should say so,” cried Sir Charles, shaking his fist at me. “And desperate! Why, the wretch would have killed us all if he had had a chance. He has stunned or killed a half dozen of my servants and your men.”

As they were all beginning to show signs of life and getting to their feet, though in a state of more or less damage, I had no compunction about having taken human life. Anyhow my plea of self-defence would have squared matters with my conscience—and Florentine.

Florentine! Always Florentine!

“Better search him for weapons,” suggested some one. As I had both hands tied, I decided to offer no objections and the pistol was pulled out of my pocket.

Sir Charles took possession of it.

“Just as I expected,” he exclaimed, as he examined it, turning his back and looking sharply into it.

I watched him and saw him do an odd thing; he put it in the outside pocket of his coat.

“He has another in his hip,” I thought; and I had reason to confirm this opinion afterwards.

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"As I was saying, we were struggling to overpower the brute when I heard your whistle which I answered; then you came up and——"

"I was out for poachers," interrupted the Constable, "and hearing you, I hastened over."

"Very fortunate all around—very fortunate—but come, let us be moving; we can't stand here all night." Sir Charles finished like a man who does not know what to say next. I tugged at my bonds, for the temptation to poke my fist into his face was too strong to have been overcome could I have got my hand free; but they had tied me with the leather reins.

"Fortunate enough!" exclaimed the Constable. "Well, come along. We might as well leave the old man here until we can get a board or wagon." Then, turning his attention to me, "Loosen his feet so he can walk and let him have his arms."

"No—no, not his arms!" remonstrated Sir Charles. "Better keep him cuffed to somebody." As he spoke he touched his vest pocket, pressing and patting it as though it were a precious thing.

It was a new movement—this touching of the pocket of his vest in an important manner—and the solicitude of it caught my attention. Was it a new eccentricity of the Baronet affectionately to caress the pocket of his vest? Or did the vest pocket contain a valuable possession? It was a matter over which I did not have to ponder long.

"Come along," said the Constable, turning our faces toward the high road. "I'll take the risk of loosening him up a bit," he continued doggedly. "I think,

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Sir Charles, you had better come, too, as a witness and for—for identification," he went on, "as we do not know who this man is—and it is—necessary——"

The Constable was in evident doubt as to the proper procedure for him to follow in murder cases. And, again, he turned to Sir Charles for assistance.

That villain looked me over coolly from head to foot and back again.

"I think I have seen this man before," said he, "but I'm not positive. He has been spending the evening at the Castle—evidently,"—with a perfectly hideous leer at me—"and I think we better conduct him back there to be identified. Possibly he is not unknown to my cousin, the Honorable Florentine Hadley, and in that case she will assist us in the work of identification."

"You ill-starred liar," I managed to say to him, but I did not dare to say it loudly nor violently, for Florentine had been mentioned and I must not drag in her name if it could be kept out. But, oh, how I did long for ten free fingers with which to choke the tongue out of Sir Charles!

"You ruffian!" I gasped. Then I shut my mouth and kept it shut, for it is a wise thing to keep still in a tongue fight.

"Ask him what he intended to do with this."

Sir Charles lifted the bottle of chloroform and shook it in the Constable's face.

The Constable glanced from one to the other and I thought he appeared to be wavering. Perhaps it was only my fancy but I could have said that he hated and feared Sir Charles.

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Sir Charles uncorked the bottle and a faint sweet whiff smote our nostrils. "Enough here to put twenty men to sleep," he observed.

"I'd like to bet you've done some good work in town to-night," he sneered, looking at me. "I'll take chances that you've helped yourself to a diamond or so."

My heart stopped beating though I would not have dared to say why, but I found the voice to retort:

"If the diamonds have been stolen I'll know where to look."

Perhaps I hit the bull's-eye, for there was a flush.

"You better come along," said the Constable.

"You haven't asked him yet what he was doing here with the servants at this hour of the night," I demanded, and then, in a lower tone, I muttered to Sir Charles: "I'll settle with you later about that black bag and its contents."

It was dark, but I know Sir Charles paled.

"Ask him," I cried, as though I were the accuser and he the accused.

The Constable looked at Sir Charles, repeating the question dummylike.

"My carriage broke down part way from London," explained that gentlemanly villain, easily. "And as I was going to the Castle I concluded to try the rest of the way on foot; I came along quite noiselessly and, as I reached this part of the road, I heard voices. Of course I stopped to listen. There were pistol shots and a struggle and I knew that somebody had been hurt, perhaps mortally."

SIR CHARLES IS DISCONCERTED

"What—what did you do then?" asked the Constable.

"I hurried to the Castle to get help, for, of course, I could do nothing by myself alone," and the ruffian held up his mutilated hand, wrapped in the white handkerchief: "So, as rapidly as possible, I went for assistance. When we arrived on the scene we found that murder had been committed. This man," indicating me with a wave of his bad hand, "was bending over his victim and searching his pockets for plunder."

"You are a liar," I yelled, forgetting prudence, "and you know it; I'd like to kill you this minute."

The word had an electrical effect upon the Constable. It was as if I had already committed the act.

"You are right, Sir Charles, sir!" said he, tipping his hat and getting back some of his manner. "We will go back to the Castle. Maybe—for all we know—there's been murder done there."

"Very likely! I'd like to bet money on it."

I'd have taken up his bet, but I bet with gentlemen only. So the procession turned and we started back, with Sir Charles walking ahead with the black bag and the lantern, the latter curiously hung from his deformed hand; while the Constable and his men—and I—followed after.

We had gone only a few steps when a sound in the sidebrush of the road brought us to a halt. Sir Charles stepped aside.

"Go on without me," he called. "I'll follow. Don't let him get away, Constable."

We stepped along but I managed to turn my head.

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My hat was gone and my collar was wrenched loose, while a sleeve of my coat was torn from its fastenings, but my wits were with me. So bruised and dishevelled was I that I could not turn comfortably; but from the tail of my eye I caught a glimpse of a flying skirt of brilliant colors, and of a woman with something odd wound around her head. Sir Charles tried to hide her from my gaze, but I saw her put one arm around his neck—or was the starlight playing me a feeble trick—and draw his head down.

An idea, or rather an association of ideas flashed through my mind.

"Step lively," said one of the men, giving my already twisted arm a jerk.

"Step lively, yourself," I retorted.

But, having asserted my independence, I did step livelier, not only because it was expedient to do so, but because I wanted to get back to Florentine, to whom the news of the new work of deviltry might have traveled ahead. And that is why, when I again turned my head to look, the woman had disappeared, and Sir Charles was following with the lantern swinging from his mutilated hand.

He looked so hateful, so utterly devilish, that I could not resist the temptation that popped into my mind to insult him.

"Was that your Sepoy?" I shouted.

He did not or would not hear. And, so, we plodded back toward the Castle.

CHAPTER XIII

THE FLASH OF A DIAMOND

VARIOUS thoughts, and not very happy ones at that, went through my mind. Had the news been broken to Florentine? And how would she take it? Would she swoon as girls do in books—and believe the worst of me? Would she take fright at my appearance and think me the rascal Sir Charles would paint me? Was she of the stuff to be moulded by the caprice of another? Could she continue to believe in me in spite of the evidence which I now saw would be considerable?

But, and here was the maddening thought, how about her marriage—our marriage—and how about Sir Charles! That he had determined to marry her at any hazard was now perfectly clear to me, and that he would stop at nothing—life, death, robbery, nor any other thing—was equally evident. With me out of the way he might be able to force her into it, for, though the aunts hated him, they also feared him, and I had no faith, anyway, in their moral strength to resist.

My poor darling! It was not on my account that I was troubled, but on hers; with nerves weakened by the shock of the last twenty-four hours, would she give way? For her to give way meant certain triumph for Sir Charles. But I would at least have time for

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a word with her, a look, a sign of love, a whisper of courage, and, more than all, a hint of warning.

We were approaching the Castle; already we had made the sharp turn in the road, and Florentine, with her face pressed against the square of yellow light in the drawing-room, had seen us coming. For a minute she stared hard; then seeing me all torn and bloody—she told me afterwards that she thought I was dead—she buried her face in her hands. But it was only for a second. A minute later, as we came up the broad walk and were mounting the Castle steps, she stood in the doorway, brave and ready.

Though it was hardly the time nor place to take note of a lady's appearance, I want to record the fact that never had I seen so beautiful a vision. If she had been a Lorelei she would have led men on to their doom; but being an angel it was evident she was put there to point the way toward salvation.

Never did so gruesome a company behold so lovely a sight. Her calmness was in strange contrast to our quarrelsome discord.

She had thrown off her cloak and her exquisite neck and arms gleamed white against the yellow glow of the open doorway. Her hair, always like spun silver, was burnished into frosted gold by the candle flashes and her eyes, great beautiful eyes, were soft with a message which meant much to me. She was white and her lips, a bright ripe red, when last I saw them, were pale. But she was quite composed. I noted with joy, even at that moment that she was the sort of woman who grows cool and courageous in the face of trouble. Only in her eyes there was

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a flash of terror, and when she saw Sir Charles, she trembled.

Once did her nerve fail her and then only for a moment. When she saw me, she gave a cry and ran forward. I thought she was going to throw herself upon me. Sir Charles saw it too and I heard him curse under his breath.

"Florentine, go into the house," he ordered.

She hesitated and looked at me. A motion of my head told her to go.

"And lock up your pearls," he called after her. "We've got a robber here and a murderer; you don't know him as well as I do."

Sir Charles looked at her with what he intended for a smile but which ended in a leer.

"Florentine," he said, as low as his rasping voice would permit, "he is a knave and I can prove it."

"I think—if I know the gentleman—he will give you a chance to prove it some day," she retorted with a spirit which surprised me.

It took Sir Charles by surprise also, for he flushed purple. "Wait, Florentine," he uttered thickly, "I've got something for you—a present."

It was his one soft spot, his one good trait that he loved Florentine. He whispered, and I could have sworn that he said a wedding present, for Florentine tossed her head angrily.

With fumbling fingers he searched the pocket of his vest on the left side—he could not search with the right hand—and out of it he drew a small object. It was not so very little, either, but it looked small as he fumbled it in his awkward left hand fingers.

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So this was the treasure he had been affectionately and proudly patting in the pocket of his vest!

He held it up until it caught the light.

"It is for you, Florentine," he said, "a present for you."

He turned it in his hand and a spark of light from within the house fell upon it. Instantly I saw it flash; it was a diamond,—a diamond of wonderful size and of remarkable brilliancy.

"How beautiful!" was Florentine's involuntary exclamation as he extended it toward her.

"Take it!"

"It is a lovely stone," said the girl, drawing back her hand, "but I do not want it—from you."

"The Devil!" he exclaimed. And then he muttered something low. It sounded as though he said, "I'll make you pay for this insult."

Then lifting the diamond high, so that its flash could be seen for a long distance he let the light play upon it.

"Look!" he cried, turning to the men. He must have been intoxicated with vanity to make such a display. "Look! A wedding present for the Honorable Miss Hadley, a diamond worth a king's ransom!"

There was a rustle in the brush,—a sharp rustle, which both Florentine and I distinctly heard. She looked quickly and I followed her eyes, but we could see nothing. A murmur from the men rose as they crowded around to see.

"It's worth the whole county," bragged Sir Charles; "and it shall grace the brow of my bride, the Honorable Florentine Hadley."

THE FLASH OF A DIAMOND

Florentine caught his last words and glanced contemptuously at him; then turning to go into the house she looked back and deliberately laughed!

Sir Charles choked with anger but he lifted the diamond again.

"A wedding present for my bride!"

It caught the light once more and its flash flew wide, bringing forth an involuntary exclamation from the crowd.

Then Sir Charles *put it back in his vest pocket.*

As he did so both Florentine and I turned in the direction of the brush from which there came a distinct crackling.

How we got into the Castle I don't remember. But I know that, in an incredibly short space of time, we were in the hallway with Aunt Faith, Aunt Hope and Aunt Charity standing around me, and Uncle Henry filling up the background. Mr. Bradstreet was there, and the family servants were huddled in a frightened group, while the Constable's posse stood guard over all.

They were all talking at once, and in the *melée* and the mix-up, Florentine slipped to my side and I bent my head low enough for her to whisper in my ear. Her lips managed to touch my face and she spoke softly to me. Sir Charles had disappeared or we would not have had this minute's whisper.

"There's a revolver in his coat pocket," I said softly. "Get it and hide it in your bodice."

She disappeared in the crowd, for there were at least twenty men of us and, when she reappeared, she touched her bosom to show me that she had hidden it there.

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But now the commotion began; they were talking and gesturing and arguing. In the midst of it all, I could make out that Sir Charles wanted me locked up for murder. He, himself, was perfectly willing to bear testimony that he had been an eye-witness of the crime. He had seen me murder the Rev. Mr. Pancoast. His object—now apparent—in bringing me to the Castle was to have Florentine see me all bloody and battered, and to let her hear me accused of crime. He thought that, if he could get me locked up, even for a few hours, he would be able to bring enough pressure to bear upon Florentine to force her to marry him. But he did not know Florentine.

It has always been my opinion that, if men were better listeners there would be more men in Paradise. If they would hear the voice of the woman who loves them she would lead them straight to the Celestial Gate, past all this earth's pitfalls, right into Heaven itself. I believe that the men who succeed are those who have asked a woman to tell them how to succeed, and I know that at least one who is out of prison has managed to keep out because of a woman's intercession.

At the mention of the Rev. Mr. Pancoast's name, Florentine exclaimed:

"Poor, dear, old Mr. Pancoast, where is he?"

"Lying in the road, where this villain left him," answered Sir Charles, indicating me with a hideous gesture.

"But we cannot, surely, leave him lying there. We must go and get him and bring him to the Castle."

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"No use, your Ladyship," said the Constable. "He's dead, stiff, stark dead! And his horse, too!"

"Poor old Jephtha's Daughter! But we must not leave Mr. Pancoast lying out in the road, it is terrible, inhuman! We must bring him here until he can be taken home."

"What's the use of bothering with a dead man," growled Sir Charles.

Florentine shot an indignant glance at him.

"We must go and bring his body here," said she, "and I am going with you. Uncle Henry will accompany us, will you not, Uncle Henry?"

Uncle Henry acquiesced and while Uncle Henry was saying that he would go with her, Florentine had darted up the stairs and was gone. I looked at Uncle Henry; mechanically, he was taking the palette off his thumb; and Aunt Hope, whose sympathies were with Florentine, was finding his hat and coat.

"I wanted to show you that picture of the bathtub," said Uncle Henry, looking at me wistfully.

"Wait awhile," I said, for it was evidently not the hour for any art criticism.

Florentine was back in an incredibly short space of time, looking very trim in her short tweed skirt and walking shoes; but, even while she was gone, Sir Charles had whispered to the Constable something which made that rather pliable gentleman change his mind.

"I'm afraid it won't do, Madame," he said to Florentine, as she stood in the hallway, waiting for us. "We are only wasting time and this fellow must be locked up first."

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"We are going now and you can lock him up afterwards," answered she promptly, as she coolly pulled on her gauntlet gloves.

"I don't like to take chances, Miss, when there's murder on our hands. And I'm for putting this man in jail as quick as possible. There's a back road leading down from the Castle grounds, and, as it's the shortest cut to the jail, I'm for taking it and getting our man safely housed."

"Sensible officer," exclaimed Sir Charles. "We will go down the back road and get him behind bars."

But again he reckoned without Florentine.

"It is inhuman," declared she, "positively inhuman to leave an old man lying dead in the road at midnight, the prey of robbers, wild animals and we don't know what!"

"That's so, your ladyship," agreed the Constable, again veering.

"Come, then, with me, all of you," she cried like a Joan of Arc, "and we will bring the body here and then—then—we will——"

I looked at Florentine and she steadied her voice:

"Then," she said clearly, "we will send this man to jail."

I will remark, almost in parenthesis, that it is not at all like me to be so quiet on an occasion like this, when life, liberty and happiness were all so closely concerned. But it certainly seemed a time when eloquence on my part would be wasted, so I said nothing.

"It's as you say, your Ladyship," said the Constable as we turned to retrace our steps.

CHAPTER XIV

WITH INTENT TO KILL

SIR CHARLES had been an irritated listener to the last part of our conversation, one foot stamping the ground like an impatient horse.

"Do you mean to tell me that you are going to let this rascal go with us?" he demanded, facing the Constable.

The latter stammered something.

"Yes, I'm going, and I haven't got a crown diamond in my pocket either," I flung at him.

It was a senseless remark but it hit him on the raw. His face tightened until it seemed all muscle and the flesh turned green in the lantern light. We were almost in front of the Castle and decency should have kept him quiet, but it was not in his make-up.

"You'll pay for that, you——" he shouted, and I saw his hand go to his hip.

"The pistol!" gasped Florentine. "He has a pistol in his pocket."

And, then, before I realized it, I saw it! It was in his left hip pocket and his left hand was grasping it. I looked at him in amazement; surely he would not be so reckless as to shoot! Would he, an English baronet, cut down an unarmed man, in the open, unsheltered and undefended? His fingers closed around the weapon and I saw that he was taking aim. The

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skill with which he was manipulating it suggested his Sepoy training; he could shoot from the hip; and he was pointing his pistol full at me, his finger was upon the trigger.

In the interval I had, unnoticed, worked my hands free, and quick as a flash I shot forward and, with an old trick, learned in boyhood, I lunged past him and caught his elbow from the back driving it upward with one swift blow that sent the pistol pointing downward. His finger pressed it and it discharged into the ground, barely missing his own foot; he swore a descriptive oath and hurled himself forward at me, and I fell on him.

Perhaps to my shame I tell it now, that I fought a cripple; his right hand was fingerless and he was divested of those five telling weapons in a fight. But I tell it also that, never in all my experience as an athlete—and I have boxed and wrestled with the best of them—did I encounter such strength. His right hand he used as a club, a great terrific weapon of bone and muscle; and, with his mighty left arm, he held and twisted me. He was fingerless on the right, but like most cripples he had developed his normal side until it was of abnormal strength; and his great left leg and thigh and powerful body muscles crushed and bent me, while his superior weight bore me under as a mighty log might carry under a stick of driftwood; I stiffened in his grasp, helpless.

What would have been the outcome I do not know, but with a quickness which was an instinct of self-preservation I drew a long breath and suddenly relaxed. It was a ruse as old as the grassy crest on

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which we fought, but it worked. I could feel his mighty weight settling upon me; then, easing a little, as he saw that his blows had done their work, he rolled a little to one side to rest, and, then, before he could recover—for I was quicker than he—I dealt him a rib blow which doubled him; and, while he panted, I wriggled out from under and sprang to my feet. It was none too soon for he was up and after me.

Drawing back his great club of a right arm, he threw all his strength into it; and, with a vile oath, he hurled himself toward me. I saw him coming, and, by a trick of the jiu jitsu, learned in my schoolboy days, I ducked, and, as I ducked, I gave his arm a swift downward blow, so as to bend it at the elbow, and at the same I clinched my fist and struck his hand from underneath.

It was a terrible blow and the great muscular thing caught it full. The wrist turned and, with all its force, it drove the hand back home. He struck himself full in the mouth. With a great yell he sank to his knees, the blood spurting from nose and lips.

Many a time have I seen this trick done in the gymnasium but never with so deadly an effect. I looked at Sir Charles and made a motion to help him; for the blood seemed spouting from all his features, and, in spite of my disgust, I felt a pity for him.

I did not dare to glance at Florentine; when I did look she had turned her head away.

Perhaps Sir Charles had not dealt himself as fatal a blow as I feared; perhaps the bloody spurt was more spectacular than vital, but I know he was soon on his

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feet again—for he had been felled by his own hand—when, if I may be believed, his fingers wandered not to his pistol pocket but to the pocket of his vest—the pocket in which he had placed the diamond.

The instinct of greed was strong even at such a moment.

"It's safe—until somebody murders you to get it," I muttered at him. It was the most foolish remark of my life; but my anger at the name he had called me and at the pointed pistol died hard.

"Murder," he cried with shattered nerve. "Oh, my God!"

"Come, come, no more of this, gentlemen," ordered the Constable, who had stood an actless spectator. "If we are going down the road we'd best be moving along."

I stepped over to his side, and Sir Charles, still spluttering and making futile attempts at righting his clothes, took the other part of the road.

"Officer," he exclaimed, "I call you and all the rest to witness that this man made a murderous attack upon me and I command you to arrest him for assault with intent to kill."

"Yes, sir," answered the Constable, and his voice indicated that he meant to follow instructions. "Now get in line," shouted he. "You are my prisoner; walk next to me."

I nodded acquiescence and Sir Charles darted a cautious look in my direction.

"Florentine," he called, looking over to where my lady of the trim skirt and walking shoes stood by the roadside, "you come here and walk with me."

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For answer, Florentine flashed a look of contempt at him and, without speaking, she stepped over and took her place next me. So we started down the road again.

It was the third time I had traveled it on foot that night, but now that I had Florentine by my side, I cared nothing. Certain arrest awaited me and imprisonment. But to have the lady of my dreams with me this moment under the golden stars was sufficient consolation for all the horror that was to come. In the interval at the Castle I had managed to get straightened up a bit so that, in spite of my experience, I looked a little less desperate than when I last traversed the rough path.

Florentine managed to keep step with the Constable and me, and, sometimes, as a blessed privilege, the soft wind blew her skirts across me.

"I shall not be gone long," I whispered. "I shall be released some day."

For answer she seized my arm in her two warm hands. "I cannot let you go—at all," she said.

"Do not——." I tried to say but my voice caught; and I could utter no word. So we talked in silence, that speaking language of those who think the things which others must not hear them say.

In a life-time of casual acquaintance we could never have been drawn together as by the character tests of this night.

We went down the steep grade, made the sharp turn and plodded ahead along the carriage road. There was nothing to be seen except the stony path which stretched like a wide grey ribbon in front of

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us. Overhead hung the tree branches canopied with a network of leaves that looked like black lace against the dark blue sky.

Once in the semi-darkness, I again caught a flutter of pink and grey, of scarlet and blue and the faintest rustle of soft silk. "The Sepoy girl," I said to myself. "But why is she here?" A question which I speedily answered to my own satisfaction when I saw her walking almost upon the heels of Sir Charles. And then I remembered the story of how they had gone out to India together, and how the girl would not remain in India after Sir Charles' return. It was not such a pretty chapter of family history that I wanted to dwell upon it, with Florentine by my side, so I dismissed it at once.

Florentine was the first to break the silence.

"Oh, I am so—so sorry!"

"Sorry for what?" I asked.

"For—for getting you into trouble—this terrible night's disgrace."

"It is Sir Charles," I replied promptly, "and it's no disgrace to love a lady."

She gave my arm a trembling squeeze. "But the arrest—the awful imprisonment."

"I shall at least be near you——"

"Hush," she whispered, clutching me with a nervous hand. "There are things I do not understand but I dare not speak of them now."

I looked and saw the Sepoy girl crowding against Florentine as though to catch each word.

"Neither do I understand," I replied hotly. "But

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I shall not have to wait long before I do understand——”

Hello! There was a shout from the man ahead; in the dark he had fallen, as I had, upon the head of the dead horse. Hello! we all came up, the whole party of us, and over the old dead animal the others climbed.

“Be careful,” I cautioned, catching hold of Florentine. “Lean on me and do not be afraid. It will be a shock to you to see the dead man.”

I peered ahead. The buggy, borne down by some trick of wind or weight, had turned completely over, partially overturning the old horse with it, and now it could not be righted until the harness had been cut free, and, until that time, the rescuers could not liberate the body of old Mr. Pancoast.

They crowded around, discussing how best to lift the wagon. The harness must be cut, but there were no knives heavy enough to do it. So it ended by dispatching two laborers back to the Castle for tools with which to do the work. And this meant a delay of a quarter of an hour.

CHAPTER XV

A MOMENT OF TEMPTATION

I KEPT at Florentine's side, she was trembling so. "Sweet girl," I whispered, "do not fear!" She murmured something into my downheld ear and I knew that her grief was because I must leave her so soon.

"But you are not afraid?" I asked.

"I dread and I fear," she managed to say.

And then in little broken words she explained to me that she knew I was innocent, but that, under the stern English laws, I would never go free. With Sir Charles and the Constable against me for assault, and the dead body of old Mr. Pancoast as witness of murder, I would either be hung at once, in the inexorable English way or rot out years of my life in an English prison. She told me, sobbing and shivering, but I heard and knew.

I, too, saw my doom. But it was not the future that I dreaded for myself, it was the fate of Florentine if I were taken from her.

Beyond, in the blackness, stood the Constable and his men waiting for the laborers to return from the Castle; all were talking excitedly; we were unobserved.

Suddenly and almost hysterically, Florentine threw her arms around me. We were strangers, yet we

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were flung together by Fate as certainly as though tossed by an earthquake into an abyss that held only us two; in a few hours we had lived the life that experience deals out dallying through the years.

"Do you love me?" she asked, her lips almost against my cheek.

I did not reply; it was no time for mere speech. Her next words brought the blood to my face.

"Then, if you love me, do not go!"

"Go, sweetheart?"

"Do not go away from me—if you love me, you will not let them take you away."

"But——"

"You need not go with them, listen to me and I will show you."

In quick, loving, excited words, she told me how there was a path just off there in the woods, through which we might easily slip. She knew the road well, had taken it a hundred times as a child; and, once in the woods, we could find our way to the crossing where there lived a tenant who would risk his life for her. And he would carry us to London. Once there—once there—the dear girl could think of no more—she would leave the rest to me. But in the ten or fifteen minutes we could gain such headway that they could not find us, and she doubted if Sir Charles, moral coward as he was, would dare to alarm the countryside to search for us.

"They will think we have returned to the Castle and we shall have an hour to get away before they miss us," she urged.

The dear girl put her arms around my neck. I

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lifted my head to clear my brain in the cool night air and her throat touched mine.

"Kiss me," she begged.

I bent my head, her full lips parted and her round red mouth, like a love apple, tempted me.

"Take me and let us go," she cried. "I cannot live to see them put you in a cell and—and——"

Her voice broke and I knew the truth; she was afraid of Sir Charles, horribly afraid.

The woods lay green and fragrant ahead of us; and, in the distance, one could imagine, almost feel, the lights of London.

"Put your arm around me, so I can guide you, and let us dash through the woods," she whispered, her tears on both our cheeks.

It was the moment when the man decides! I raised my head.

"Yes, we will go," I said. "Come! We can make good speed; now for the woods!"

We took a furtive step, glancing cautiously back. They were busy with the buggy and had forgotten us. The way through the trees was dark and safe; and I knew under Florentine's lead we could make the road. Once in London I would seek the home of the American Ambassador where, with my word that I had committed no crime, I could at least find sanctuary. To-morrow in the dawn we could make the Calais-Dover crossing, thence to Cherbourg and—home. By that time the real criminal would be found—the murderer of the Rev. Mr. Pancoast—and the matter would die down.

We took a stealthy step into the crackling under-

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brush. I glanced at Florentine; her eyes were on my face with a curious expression. All of a sudden, our positions had changed; she had a maternal look, the look of a woman who broods over, fears for, excuses and protects the thing she loves.

A twig snapped. "Stoop low," she said sharply; "they will see you; oh, my love, if they should capture you now—running."

There was a glance of nervous apprehension upon her face, a look that cut me to the quick.

"Don't move!" she breathed, as she drew her skirt across my shirt bosom. It was the instinct with which a woman shields a murderer, and I saw the shame of it, the degradation, and the scandal.

I stood upright and stamped upon the underbrush and the dry twigs snapped like pistol shots.

"Florentine," I exclaimed aloud, "I am not going. I shall not run. I cannot take you with me this way."

And then I kissed her and told her the reason.

There are great physical tests through which a woman goes more proudly than a man; he quails and blanches, an arrant coward, where she is as courageous as a knight.

But there are tests in which the man weighs; each sex is stronger along the paths in which it has had the more experience; she in the physical world, he in the moral.

There, in the woods, screened by the night, with the voices of the men coming excitedly to us, I took Florentine in my arms and told her why. There were other people in the world, and in the world yet to

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dawn, besides us two, and there was a very mighty God——

But she interrupted me with a cry of terror:

"I shall die; I am afraid of my cousin; he is so strong, so brutally strong."

Sir Charles! An ice cold chill passed over me; I drew my hand across my brow and shook it dripping; in the middle of my forehead the great blue vein stood out like a whipcord and, as the cool air touched me, I realized that there was not one dry thread upon me.

"Take me," she begged, "far away from here."

At that nerve-racking moment she saw only a way out of the danger in which she thought she had placed me, but I beheld further; she dreaded the bars for me, but I winced at the color supplements for her; that she, the reigning beauty, and I, a Bostonian, could escape publicity was too much to hope. She shrank from the local scandal but I knew she would only escape it to plunge into a deeper. She felt the hand of the Constable but I felt the clutch of the inevitable.

Yet!

I looked into the woods—the dark sweet-smelling woods that have led many a reckless Paul and Virginia onward with their verdant lure—the scent of the leaves was hypnotic; about us hung the mystic ether of the shrubs that give forth their odors only in the night. But I knew that nowhere in all the beautiful forest ran there one rill from which could be gathered a drop for the cup of Lethe—that drink that

A MOMENT OF TEMPTATION

deadens remorse—and the New England conscience Salem-ed!

I led Florentine back; she still holding on to me and crying.

"You stay here with Jephtha's Daughter," I said, speaking as gently as to a child. "You stay here. I'm going to help!"

She was very pale, but she did as I told her; she sank upon a stone which I brought from the roadside.

Once I went back to her:

"You will wait for me until I am free?"

"Yes, forever," she said. And I made her repeat it.

It was a selfish promise to exact from a girl at that time, but I couldn't help it. To hear her say that she would wait gave me hope, that luxury which God extends to his most helpless child—and I was far from feeling helpless except in that I could not spare her every pang.

I vaulted over the dead horse now cut free from its harness. "Let me help," I exclaimed, glad to be free from the self-stung tension of a temptation in which I did not trust my own strength.

I got no further for there was a cry from the fellow ahead. He had stooped and looked into the buggy. The second man leaned over and looked on, and the third. All three exclaimed.

I got down and peered in, and, like the others, I uttered an exclamation of surprise.

The buggy was empty.

CHAPTER XVI

THE AWAKENING

INVOLUNTARILY I felt for the whiskey flask, for it had been my last recollection as I fell forward over the Rev. Mr. Pancoast. It was in my hand then, I remembered, and now! It was gone!

We stood there, in the road, looking from one to the other. The murdered man had vanished, there was no doubt about it, and only the poor old horse lay there as mute evidence of the night's work.

"What's become of him?" asked the Constable, looking at me as though I was directly responsible.

"I don't know," I admitted.

"I'll bet he could tell if he wanted to," muttered Sir Charles, getting down upon his knees and looking in. The novelty of his position distressed him for he got red in the face.

"The buggy's empty, that's certain, and if this highwayman didn't take the body away, then some of your men did. That's sure!"

A murmur ran among the men.

"What's the matter?" snarled Sir Charles.

The Constable consulted with them a moment.

"They say they did not steal the body and they think it is not right for you to insinuate that they did," said the Constable, with unwonted boldness for a timid man.

THE AWAKENING

A sound of approval went through the crowd.

"What's that?" snapped Sir Charles. "Say it over again. They dare to say that they think it is not right for me—me—they dare to criticise me!"

He paused with uplifted stump, shaking it right in the Constable's face.

"What in——"

A sound nearby made us all stop and listen; even Sir Charles paused in his wrath as he heard it. It was an unearthly noise, one that sent the chills running through us, an echo that seemed to come out of the stillness and blackness of the night.

It was a groan!

We stood still, every man of us holding his breath and listening. I ran to Florentine's side.

The groan was repeated.

We looked in the direction of the sound, each man holding on to his neighbor for fear.

"It's a ghost," whispered one of the men, "the ghost of the poor old man."

A few feeble words reached us, a sort of muttering.

We moved involuntarily in the direction of the noise, for it led us straight to the deep gutter that was dug at one side of the road. In the furrow, which was wide, there lay a great fallen log. And across the log was stretched a gaunt figure.

"A ghost!" gasped one of the men.

"Silence," ordered the Constable, but his hand trembled so that the lantern shook.

There were other faint sounds as we peered into the darkness.

THE STAIRWAY ON THE WALL

"It's Mr. Pancoast!" cried Florentine.

We stood staring at him speechless with amaze. Yes, there was no doubt that it was he, and, while we looked, he turned and moved his lips.

A very faint "Hello" came forth; his voice, though feeble, was certainly not the voice of the orthodox ghost, hollow and resounding.

We stood still, dumb with surprise. Florentine was the first to find her voice. And I verily believe that the dear girl grasped the situation before I did; it was Mr. Pancoast and he was alive. Yet—it might be—the ghost of the Rev. Jedediah, and not he in the flesh.

"Oh, Mr. Pancoast!" exclaimed Florentine, "Mr. Pancoast."

She stepped to the edge of the road and was for climbing down into the gutter but I was there before her. I jumped down among the fallen leaves and touched the old man lying there upon the great crumpled log. As I stooped, I got a whiff of something which told me that the Rev. Jedediah had taken measures for the preservation of his life. He had grasped the rudiments of the first law of nature, for beside him lay the flask, its top gone.

"Mr. Pancoast," I asked, taking hold of his shoulder, "are—are you hurt?" He winced, but the odor was heavy and a smile appeared. It occurred to me that it was an utterly inane question, but I could think of no proper words at that moment. But, as it proved, it was quite the most agreeable thing I could have uttered.

THE AWAKENING

"Hurt, no, why should I be hurt?" he muttered. "Where's the medicine bottle?"

He groaned and it was evident that he was none the better for his adventure—but he was alive. And this was more than could be said of Jephtha's Daughter, for the shot that had missed the old man, had taken the old mare.

"Here, lend a hand," I shouted, "we must get him out of here."

The log was wet and the leaves were damp and sticky and Mr. Pancoast, besides having passed through a strenuous night, was over seventy. We must not leave him here for one unnecessary moment. "You look all right, but how do you feel?" I queried, taking hold of his shoulders and trying to lift him.

By this time a half dozen of the Constable's men had joined me in the ditch and the servants of the Castle—now that they had become convinced that they were not seeing a ghost—had gathered around.

Willing hands assisted him to his feet; he seemed unbroken as to bones, but his morals had suffered a fracture; he wanted a drink.

A flask was quickly produced.

"Don't give him any more, he isn't accustomed to it," I objected. But it was too late, for he had seen the flask and had grasped it with eager fingers that carried it to his lips and held it there rather longer than politeness would have allowed.

"Best drink I ever had in my life," he uttered, thickly. "Only drink I've had since I left the University. Heh! Tastes good when a man's cold—hic—and wet!"

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His voice was so low that no one heard it but myself, so that the clerical cloth suffered no stain. Whatever the men may have suspected they said nothing.

"How did you get here?" I asked, taking him by the shoulder, as soon as we had carried him up to the road, for I wanted to be sure he was perfectly alive.

"Rolled down bank. Jephtha's Daughter went asleep. Shabby trick. Someone tried shoot us both. I got out, tried to get back in; buggy turned over, hit me on head. Hic—shabby trick!"

"Then what happened?" I questioned, shaking him, for he had closed his eyes and seemed lapsing off into sleep and I needed his evidence in unraveling the tangle of the night.

"Don't know. Poured whiskey in my face, and left old man to die in road with dead horse! But it's all right—everything's all right."

"Never mind," I said soothingly. "Can you stand now so that we can take you back to the Castle?"

"I'd try—if I had another drink; it saved my life."

There was no doubt about it, but I told him that he didn't need a life preserver again, so soon.

"Here, boys," I ordered, "take hold of that shoulder and steady him. Somebody give us a hand; he's a dead weight."

I was sorry that he could not tell me more, but the night's doings had been lost in the oblivion of the flask.

We lifted the Rev. Mr. Pancoast, but his legs folded under him like the blades of a jackknife.

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"Little weak in my legs," he suggested amiably. "If you'll let me stay here—till mornin'—I'll——"

"Catch hold of him, boys, and lift altogether. He's got to be carried back bodily. He'll catch his death of cold."

We lifted the old man and he stood for a second; then his legs again crumpled under him and he sank down with a peaceful smile on his face.

"I guess he's injured in his legs, sir," said the Constable.

"I don't think so," I said, "only a little bruised. But we'll have to carry him just the same."

"All right; give a lift all round, boys," shouted the Constable, and the men closed in around the Rev. Jedediah, and carried him up the bank to the road, he offering amiable suggestions but making no attempt to walk. Once he was put on his feet, but a few wobbling steps convinced him it would be much more jovial to be carried. So, with an arm around the neck of two stalwart woodsmen, and, with two more carrying his feet, he closed his eyes and gave up to the coolie method of transportation.

"Biggest time of my life," he confided to me and I believed him.

It was not until we had started up the hill again toward the Castle that my mind came back to the business in hand. The little procession was moving along ahead and the Constable and I were bringing up the rear.

"Where is Sir Charles?" I asked, looking around, for he had disappeared in the excitement.

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"He must have gone on ahead," suggested the Constable.

I looked but did not see him. And then an awful thought occurred to me. I stared ahead and behind and I peered along each side of the road.

"Where is the Honorable Miss Hadley?"

"She was here a minute ago," he replied, lifting his lantern, "perhaps she is with Sir Charles."

The same thought had come to me but it gave me little comfort.

"I would like to go on," I said quickly, "and prepare them at the Castle for our coming."

Really this was only an excuse, and a rather transparent one, to go and search for Florentine.

The Constable looked doubtful. "You are still my prisoner, and I don't suppose I can let you go."

"But the man is alive," I exclaimed. "Surely you cannot hold me for killing a man who is alive and walking in front of us."

There was a bit of hyperbole in this statement for the manner in which the Rev. Mr. Pancoast was going up the hill could scarcely be called walking. With his arms around the shoulders of the two sturdy men and his feet propelled by another two, he was making the slow and laborious ascent. Now and then the procession would halt while the men got fresh wind.

"And he seems comfortable and happy," I observed.

"He's loaded," said the Constable. "Not being used to it, it's gone right to his head; lucky, though, he found that whiskey or he might have been dead by now."

THE AWAKENING

"But surely I am not to blame for that, nor for the fact that some miscreant of the woods shot his old horse."

I argued seriously, but I had my doubts as to the shot being fired by a simple miscreant of the woods, but I wanted to get free; and there was no doubt that the Constable was being impressed by my argument.

"He's as well as he ever was," I declared. "Listen!"

"If you have a pleasant thought—
Sing it! Sing it!"

floated back in wavering strains.

"Do you hear that?" I added by way of emphasis.

"The Rev. Mr. Pancoast is not dead."

The Constable agreed with me.

"Then why not let me go?"

He hesitated and shook his head.

CHAPTER XVII

FLORENTINE IS MISSING

UNDER ordinary circumstances I would have tipped him over and, defying consequences, I would have quickly followed the path taken by Florentine, as nearly as I could trace it. But, for the third time that evening, prudence prevailed and I followed slowly. If only I had known the direction Florentine had taken, I would have been more comfortable. Had she been forcibly carried away by Sir Charles? but—no, that was impossible for, at a cry, a sound, I would have been at her side. Had she, almost as disturbing a thought, been frightened into leaving us and had she started, past midnight, on that long dreary walk back to London? Either supposition was distressing.

But I was destined not to be kept long in doubt as to her direction at least. Scarcely had we gone ten feet when I saw ahead of me in the road a filmy grey veil; I stooped and picked it up tenderly, for I recognized it as one which Florentine had worn only a few minutes before and which, I knew afterward, the dear girl had dropped as a signal.

So she had gone back to the Castle! But why and with whom? and had Sir Charles prevailed upon her to go with him? I stepped along, by the side of the Constable, deliberating these things; that it was not

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the lure of the diamond that had called her I felt sure. But the situation was depressing to me, view it how I would; for the thought of Florentine in the company of Sir Charles filled me with a presentiment of coming evil, as certain as it was disagreeable. And, as I pondered, we plodded ahead, a strange procession winding over the rough road under the stars of the early morning. To say that violence filled my soul is to put it mildly; I was wild with suppressed desire, with the wish to go to Florentine and find out what, if anything, had befallen her; I must, I would go to her!

A touch upon the arm roused me from this impotent reverie; I looked around; it was Sir Henry, whom, until now, I had utterly forgotten; yet there he was, looking smaller, meeker and more utterly apologetic than ever.

"Hello!" I exclaimed for lack of anything more interesting to say.

"Hello!" he responded delightedly, "I—I see you are going back to the Castle."

"Your eyesight is good," I muttered, for he disturbed my thought current.

"And I thought, maybe, you'd have time, if it isn't too late—or too early—don't you know, to look at the painting. I'd like to have you see the bathtub, it's very realistic, most realistic."

"Where is it?" I asked, for my enthusiasm as an art critic varies according to circumstance.

"It's upstairs, in the big east wing, the wing beyond Florentine's room; it's as big as a barn and empty, all except my pictures——"

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"In the wing where Florentine's room is?" I asked.

"Yes! You go upstairs, past Sir Charles' room; turn to the left, go down a long corridor, turn to the right near Florentine's room and you're in the east wing; and the picture——"

"I'll go with you to see it to-night," I said eagerly. "I'd love to see it by—by candlelight."

"It's really better so," he replied in a confidential whisper, "because it isn't finished yet and I haven't put the robe on the lady—don't you see—I'm thinking of draping her in a toga, maybe a Roman toga, maybe a bath towel—I don't know—but at present it's better, vastly better, to see the sketch by candlelight—don't you know! King David is on the roof in the distance with his field glass in his hand."

"Will Miss Hadley be in her room by the time we get back to the Castle—and if she is there would we know it—that is, shall we see her again to-night?" I asked irrelevantly, for I was determined to see Florentine or, at any rate, to know what had become of her before I slept, if, indeed, I had any plans for sleeping that night.

"I don't think so," said Sir Henry. "I saw her hurry away and I rather fancied she had something urgent on her mind."

"Did she go alone?" I asked eagerly, but without much hope of getting a lucid reply, for I had an idea that the eyes of Sir Henry were blind to aught except his painting. But here, it seems, I was mistaken in my estimate of Sir Henry.

"No, she did not go alone," he answered, glancing around and whispering, "Pearl was with her."

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"Who is Pearl?"

"Pearl is the Sepoy girl—the girl Lady Hope and I adopted years ago; you know—er—you must have heard the story—er—all London knows it."

I thought Sir Henry winced a little but he had probably grown hardened to it, for he went on:

"Pearl followed us to-night; she goes where Sir Charles goes—if he will let her—and, when it was all over, and we had revived Mr. Pancoast, I saw her hurrying in the direction of the Castle with Florentine."

"How long ago was it?"

"Just a few minutes ago, or a little more; I should think it has taken us about that length of time to get Mr. Pancoast started," was the lucid calculation.

So Florentine had gone back to the Castle with the Sepoy girl some time before. Well, it was a relief to know where she was even while it was a mystery. But, though I could not understand why she had gone with Pearl, I was glad Sir Charles was not her companion. After a short silence I thought I could venture to ask about him.

"Where did Sir Charles go?"

"He disappeared just a minute ago. I believe he, too, went into the direction of the Castle; anyway he was with us, and when I turned around he was gone. He hasn't much use for pictures," added Sir Henry with a sigh, "nor for any of us, except Florentine."

"I should think it would be a matter of congratulation for you even as it is a thing of regret for her."

"I don't know," said Sir Henry doubtfully. "He is a very rich man, comes and goes as he pleases, keeps

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his town house open all the time in London; has his saddle horse here; never knows where he is going to be; owns immense mining stock; has all London in his clutches I sometimes think. As for us, he owns us, body and soul, and that is his pull—on—on Florentine.”

That Sir Henry did not intend to reveal as much of the financial skeleton-in-the-closet as this was evident, for he stopped abruptly.

“I am glad she has your sympathy,” I said warmly.

Sir Henry looked over his shoulder again and I thought he trembled a little, so that I was led to believe that, in spite of the money and gold mines, he was not enamoured of Sir Charles. His next remark explained his attitude.

“He is in love with Florentine and declares that he will have her at any cost. She, dear girl, hates, loathes, despises him and we sympathize with her, but what can she do, poor lamb! She must get married to save her fortune and Sir Charles swears he is going to get her by fair means or foul.”

“But assuredly,” I said, appealing to the sense of manliness which I could see was hidden underneath Uncle Henry’s velvet jacket, “you will not allow this girl to sacrifice herself in this way for her family. Why, all London would be up in arms if it were known; for with her youth and beauty she could make a match any day.”

Uncle Henry shrugged his shoulders and sighed. “It is a pity,” he admitted, “but there is family money at stake, a family fortune; and where there’s money, all London, as well as the rest of the world, is deaf,

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dumb and blind. Until you came last evening and made your speech asking for Florentine's hand we feared that it would be Sir Charles or nobody."

"Well, I am still in the field."

"Oh, Florentine has explained to us how you are descended from William the Conqueror, and—and—King Arthur and—and others, and there seemed no reason why it should not be a perfect match, especially as she loved you so at first sight and had been loving you madly since she first saw you ten days ago. And she told us how—how—pardon my vulgarity—how rich you were—and all that!"

Delightful, considering that she knew me only as a penniless pup of a detective.

"And she told us—her Aunt Hope and me—how much you enjoyed pictures—that you were never tired of studying them. And she explained to Charity your love for Bibles, particularly the Oxford, so that when you came, we were all quite ready to receive you with open arms. And then—this awful thing occurred."

I could see that Florentine had not been backward in taking strategic measures.

"But you surely do not think I had any hand in it, in the attempted assassination of the clergyman who was coming to marry us."

"No-o! Of course not. But Sir Charles has his suspicions aroused; he knows now that you were coming here to the Castle to marry Florentine and," with a whisper that positively trembled with fear, "when he is crossed—when he is crossed, well, you must be careful of him!"

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"I will be careful of him all right," I answered.

"Then—the further revelation—the thing Sir Charles told us to-day; if Florentine marries him it will be buried forever, for he has kept the secret well. But if not——"

"If not?"

"He will spread it to the winds of London."

"And the secret, this dark thing at which you hint so broadly?"

"It is such that none of our family would dare set foot in the social world of London for many a year to come."

"I think you exaggerate, for no family but has its flaw, but I want to tell you now that I intend to marry Florentine. And," I added, shaking my finger at him impressively, "I shall marry her to-day—to-day, do you understand?—to-day, just as we planned, unless they kill her or me!"

I spoke with some braggadocio and certainly with more confidence than I felt, for here was I, technically at least, in the hands of the Constable while Florentine had disappeared, two almost unsurmountable obstacles.

Could anything have happened to—her?

But there was no time for more thought for we had arrived at the Castle steps. Slowly the procession passed up, the Constable and I coming last; and through the wide door they went until finally all had gone in except the officer of the law, whose men had rejoined him after depositing Mr. Pancoast inside, and me! To my amazement I saw that they intended to shut me outside with the Constable.

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The door closed in our faces, leaving me staring at the outer panels; even Sir Henry, awed by the near proximity of Sir Charles, had forgotten me.

The Constable and I were upon the Castle steps.

"Now," said I, turning to him, "I am discharged, honorably discharged, or you can let me go on my parole. And if you want me again you can get me in the morning at my apartment."

"All right, sir, I suppose it is all right."

"Of course it is all right!"

Taking out a card I wrote upon it the name of one of the most impressive apartment hotels in London, for Lady Hensington, to keep me in London long enough to attend to her manifold affairs, insisted that I take a furnished flat. I had rebelled a little at the time, but my father had been Lady Hensington's lawyer, when she, herself, left Boston, the wife of a titled Englishman, a fact which gave her a proprietary right over me; so she had taken the apartment before my arrival and insisted that my baggage and my Japanese valet be personally conducted there at once. It had seemed a bit of extravagance at the time, but now I was devoutly glad to own it. The Constable studied the card, and was suitably impressed by the address.

"Very well, sir! Good-night, sir!"

"Good-night, and better luck to you with the next murderer," I called out as I stood on the steps and watched him disappear down the narrow back road where his men were waiting for him. He had evidently, in the absence of Sir Charles, declined to consider that I had committed an assault upon that gen-

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tleman; for an instant I was tempted to order him to arrest Sir Charles for pointing a loaded weapon at me but the hour and Florentine made me desist.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE HIGHWAYWOMAN

I TURNED to the Castle; for a second I stared in amazement; it had disappeared; gradually its shadowy form loomed up in front of me; but it was in darkness from top to bottom, for the lights had suddenly gone out and there was not a glimmer anywhere. I put out my hand and grasped the great brass door knocker. Surely, Sir Henry at least would be awake even though the Rev. Mr. Pancoast might be sleeping the sleep that comes of too deep a draught of weariness and joy. That he had received the blow intended for someone else was not his fault.

As I lifted the knocker, a square in the panel of the great oak door in front of me moved. I watched it with fascinated eyes as it swung creakingly inward. In the square opening, with his face set in the framework, I could see the features of Sir Charles.

"What do you want?" he demanded, looking at me blankly, as though he had never laid eyes upon me before.

"I want admittance for one thing," I said, "and then there are a few other things I may want—later. At present I'll thank you to open the door."

He laughed a nasty laugh. "I suppose you'd like

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to know where Florentine is. I'd bet a penny you'd give something to find her."

"And I expect to find her," I retorted, squaring off a little and getting ready to fight through the eight-inch oak panel. "I notice," I added, for his face fired me again, "that she was not greatly tempted by your precious stone in which you must have invested so much."

Sir Charles flushed indigo; I feared apoplexy.

"Well," he said, with his hateful rasping laugh, "she's off for London, left here half an hour ago on the fastest horse in the stables; took the short road so as to get there quickest. By the way," and he leaned further out, "I suppose you know her history—about her mother's family."

"No!" I exclaimed. Much as I hated him I thought it well to learn this mysterious secret now, once and for all. I could deal with it more intelligently if I knew it than though I continued to work in the dark.

"Oh, you're ready to listen now," he sneered. "Well, I'll tell you! The mother of your proud and Honorable Florentine is not dead; she is alive."

I started and a suspicion of the truth began to dawn.

"She's alive, but she's one of those that might better be dead. No! she doesn't live here nor in England. We pay her to live away. Her home—the place she calls home, the only home such women know—is a mining camp. She lives the life of the worst and most degraded women of the camp."

"Does Florentine know this?"

"Yes. Her Aunt Faith told her to-night, and she

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told the other sisters. They'd give their last penny to keep it from getting into the prints, you can wager your bottom dollar, Mr. Roman Elliott."

Sir Charles leered and shrugged his shoulders.

"Do you mean to tell me that you would hold this over the poor girl and force her to marry you by threatening exposure?" I demanded. "If you would, you're a blacker demon than I supposed, and God knows that was dark enough."

"I'm going to marry the girl by fair means or foul," he declared, waving the mutilated stump out of the open panel. "And it's my opinion, if the mother's bad, the girl isn't much better. So I'm not getting such a bargain for my money, after all. But her looks will carry her a few years until she fades. Now, you blanked Sir Knight, what are you going to do about it?"

"I'm going to tell you, you lie, for one thing," I exclaimed, moving up nearer to the small open panel. "And I'll leave you as a souvenir——"

"You're wasting your time and strength," he laughed. "You'd better go back to London."

And before I could strike out or reply, the little oak panel banged shut, leaving me out in the night.

I was shut out, but not vanquished. A great rage consumed me. I beat upon the doors; I shouted; I battered my fists and brought down maledictions; I threatened murder; the only sound was a laugh from within.

Utterly exhausted, I turned away.

At that moment a clock in the Castle struck. I tried to count the number but its rattling sound was

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succeeded by that of another and I could not tell the time.

I turned and looked about me. Dense woods surrounded the Castle and blackness lay everywhere, blackness except where the road led ahead, like a stream of light let down from a flickering star. Should I take the road and go back to London, and had Florentine really gone that way—and where would she remain at this hour of the night?—or should I stay here until morning and intercede with the Graces and Uncle Henry in our behalf! I could almost imagine that the Aunts Faith, Hope and Charity were thinking about me at this minute.

And the story of Florentine's mother! No wonder the dear old ladies dreaded exposure.

And Florentine, dearest girl, to win them over she had hinted that I was related to William the Conqueror.

I remembered how, once, I had wanted to play English Kings with my Cousin Irene—and how we couldn't play because she wouldn't make believe she was a queen. Irene never did believe in make-believing anything, and, besides, she preferred a foreign missionary to a king any day!

While I stood hesitating, a sudden and subtle thought came to my mind, doubtless such a thought as had occurred to my distinguished ancestor when he won that bride of his with a daring now famed in history. I would try to do by strategy that which I could not do by open dealing.

I wanted to go back and murder Sir Charles in his bed, shouting to all the world to witness my deed,

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and here I was compelled to play a puppet's part, to act as though I had been vanquished.

Swinging as jauntily down the steps as the darkness would permit, I started briskly along the path; I knew that I was being watched from the Castle windows but I would meet cunning with craft. Only once did I stop to look back and then it was to make a signal which to one who did not understand it might have gone unnoticed. I took the grey veil, Florentine's veil, out of my pocket and I waved it over my head. If Sir Charles saw it, he might have taken it as a flag of defiance; I did not go back to ask him.

Down the hill I went and around the dusky turn, whistling merrily. But, once around the bend and out of sight of the house, I stopped, for it occurred to me that it would be better to go slowly and cautiously and to listen as I walked, for, possibly, if Florentine were being detained against her will, she might send out upon the night air some sound, some signal which would call me back to her.

My object was to make Sir Charles think I had returned to London while at the same time to let Florentine know that I was nearby.

At the thought I stopped short, and then I perceived what I had not seen before, a small footpath leading to the left of the main road. I peered into it; for, a little beyond, it took a circular turn which looked as though it led back to the Castle by a circuitous route.

I turned to explore it, when, suddenly, as though she had dropped right out of the night, there stood before me in the road, a woman! She was dressed in an automobile coat and on her head was a soft

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felt hat held down by a long veil which was knotted under her chin.

At first I thought that it was Florentine and then I saw at once that it was not.

I stopped short and stared at her; if she had come down out of the skies in my plain sight, I could not have been more amazed. She cocked her head and looked at me as confidently as though I had been an old acquaintance.

"Where have you been?" she demanded. "Come now and give an account of yourself!"

I lifted my hat and bowed as politely as the situation and my surprise would permit, while from my lips there came an involuntary, "Good evening!"

"I suppose you will say you could not get away any sooner," she went on impatiently. "But I can tell you that's it's no jolly fun waiting here three hours by the side of the road for a gentleman; and never so much as a signal from you in all that time. If you hadn't floated that grey veil I'd have been gone. I was just starting along when my peepers lit on it as you came over the hill."

She stopped and her teeth chattered.

I know now how Jove felt when Minerva stepped out before him, fully panoplied and ready for fight. He was afraid of her and he wished she would vanish into the region whence she came. Man that is born of woman becomes remarkably critical; he has a high opinion of the one who flees from him but let her turn and make advances and he grows suspicious. This woman was here for no good.

I did not know what to say; there was an embar-

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passing lack of calling cards and introductions and the road was bleak. A dark lantern, hung at her belt, lit it a little way ahead. I uttered the conventions.

"It was unintentional—I did not look forward——"

It was weak but she took it as an apology.

Her features relaxed a little and in the vague light I could dimly see that she was of the voluptuous type, commonly known as "handsome." Her features were regular, though rather too brilliantly colored for conventionality, and her hair, though coppery, was dressed with elaborate care.

"Well, I'm glad I caught you," she said through her chattering teeth. "I was beginning to think you had gone down the other way, or they had got you, though you had the revolver and the chloroform and the whiskey."

She stopped and waited but I thought silence the best reply. Unfortunately it only irritated her the more for she broke out again:

"I can tell you, after this night's experience, I am ready to get out of this business; such a night as I've had, with people going over this road and carriages driving up and back, and Lord knows what not!"

"It has certainly been a rough night," I admitted, taking out my handkerchief and holding it partially over my face until I could turn sideways, so that my features were more in the shadow, for it suddenly occurred to me that this lady might be worth cultivating. She would certainly like me better if she did not search out my features with that red lantern.

"Rough!" she exclaimed, getting angry again, "I wouldn't put in another like it for all the old silver

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in the Castle, and Bud says there's a good haul of it. He thought that you, being a new one in this part of the country, could get at it better than he could. Bud can't show his face anywhere, they know him so well. He's done almost every house between here and London except the Castle; so they've been laying for him for two years."

She spoke with the pride of a woman who is the wife of an expert in his line.

"Then it is to Bud that I am indebted for this pleasant interview."

She smiled until the paint cracked on her hard red cheeks.

"Don't mention it," she said coquettishly. "But let's get out of this road."

She handily, as from practice, unhitched the dark lantern from her belt and set it down so that its light fell on her feet; then, stooping, she untied her shoe and pulled it off and shook it.

"Bly me!" she exclaimed as a pebble dropped out.

She put the shoe back on her foot and held it up to be tied, a service which I performed as nimbly as I could, for the light from the lantern was unfortunately close to my face.

"Drat the boots!" she observed as she stamped the shoe on the ground until it felt comfortable. "Bud wears rubber sneakers."

"Where is Bud?" I asked.

"He lit out when the trouble began but he'll soon be back. Oh, Bud had other work to-night, work that was worth while. He sent me ahead and told me to give you the black bag with the kit in it and then to

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wait until I got the signal from you. Then I was to meet you and tell you to hide in the side of the road with the swag until he could come out with the wagon."

"So I must thank you for the black bag, too, must I?"

"Yes," she acknowledged with a laugh, partly of pride and partly of apology. "I threw it in the carriage and I guess it must have hit your foot, but I couldn't wait to ask; the coachman nearly caught me as it was, but I heard you yell."

"It was certainly most unkind of you to try to smash my foot."

"My eye, but you're a brick. Bud would have been mad enough to kill me. But it was this way. Bud told me to watch along the side of the road for you and to give you the bag. Then he told me to wait here and let him know if you got it sure."

"Well, I got it sure."

"That's what I told him and I said you'd gone on and that the road was clear. And then there came another carriage and another one. My word, but I never saw so many carriages, and Bud was afraid to go up to the Castle!"

"What did he think would become of me if he left me?" I asked, putting what indignation I could into my voice.

"Oh, he said you'd know enough to lay low and let the stuff go until some other night. He said you'd had enough experience to know when to get drowsy and when to work."

"Very flattering of Bud."

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"My word, but you're a dandy," she repeated. "And it was mean of Bud to leave you this way. But, honest, he just couldn't help it, though he did want your first job here in England to go off bully. But everything was up against it for him."

The woman stopped and looked along the road. "I thought that was Bud," she said. "It is high time he was getting here."

I, too, glanced down the road and was devoutly thankful that Bud had not got along.

"Well, after you went on in the carriage with the black bag I hid here to tell Bud it was right as nine-pence; and then the carriages began to come, one after another! My eye, but they must have had a reception at the Castle to-night!"

I thought of Aunt Faith and the old family lawyer and Sir Charles.

"It certainly looked that way," I answered.

"And when Bud came, and I told him, he said it was all off, and that he couldn't take the silver tankards when the company was drinking out of them. So we thought we'd better both go back home and Bud said you'd know enough to follow."

"I was following!"

Again she smiled approval as she resumed. "Since there was nothing at the Castle, Bud wanted to get back, but how was he to get a cab? And while we stood here at the side of the road, like two mummies, along came a buggy. Bud thought he could fire a shot in the air and scare whoever was inside the wagon. Then he would point the pistol at him and

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make him get out and walk and Bud would take the buggy; it's one of his best tricks."

"It's as old as the hills," I scoffed.

"But the old goat was going so slow you could hardly see the wheels go round and Bud said it was taking one chance in a thousand that he'd ever get back to London behind such a horse, but it was getting late and he had to do something. So he fired a shot and the old horse reared; he must have hit it in the lid though he didn't mean to, and then the old beast dropped. That scared Bud, and the horse was done for anyhow, and there was no need to hold up the old party inside. So he caught hold of me and we ran down the road together. Bud said he wasn't going to take any more chances so he left me to wait for you and walked back to town. My word! you've been a long time coming."

"I was held," I replied truthfully.

"You don't say! Did you get in a tight corner and couldn't get out? Well, there's one comfort, they don't know you in this part of the world. But I'd have known your face anywhere, even if Bud hadn't described you to me. Why," and she gave me an arch smile, "I've had a newspaper picture of Johnny, the Australian Crook, in my looking glass for a year. And you look just exactly like your picture."

"That isn't flattery," I remarked, glancing uneasily down the road and wondering what I would do if Bud should come. "And I'm going to walk on," I added. "You can tell Bud, when he comes, that you have seen me and that I've gone."

"Say," she exclaimed, touching me playfully, "don't

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get mad, the picture was a corker. And if you'll stay till Bud comes, I'll make him let you in on something good in town. There's a big wedding to-night, one of those American heiresses marries a Duke; and there's wedding presents—my eye! And Bud's gone to look 'em over. He said he'd come back and get you, maybe; and there might be a chance to-night just before morning, when they're all sound asleep, to do a little work."

"Can't stop," I said. "Tell Bud I'll see him in town."

I turned to go.

"Say," she called after me, "don't forget our number; here it is written on a piece of paper. Bud told me to write it down for you. It's two flights up in the rear, and don't you go and get yourself lost."

I promised faithfully not to get myself lost.

"Say," she called again. "I forgot to ask you for the countersign, but I knew you, anyway, though Bud told me to be sure to make you give it."

She fumbled with the slip of paper on which there was an address; I clutched it hastily and put it in my pocket.

"That's where we live; now speak the countersign!" she demanded.

"It's late and I can't bother with it; ask me some other time," I called back.

"Please give it—just so I can tell Bud you had it."

She came after me and grabbed my sleeve, and, looking me straight in the eye she solemnly pronounced the word "Rome!" Then she repeated it. "Rome!"

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I looked at her.

"Well," she snapped, "why don't you say your word?"

"It's too late," I remonstrated again, tearing myself away and turning toward the little side path.

"Well, please give it, just this once, now, 'Singapore!'"

"Singapore!" I cried, moving on, for I distinctly heard the sound of wagon wheels, though her own ears were so covered by the automobile veil that I knew she hadn't heard them yet.

"And now I'll bid you good night and move off. If Bud comes tell him I'm not here."

I was already out of her sight but, far from being reassured, I was in a more disturbed frame of mind than before.

I knew that there was another man on foot in the woods that night and prowling around the Castle.

And I remembered the diamond and how Sir Charles had flashed it—and the curious rustling in the brush which both Florentine and I had noticed.

Yes, there was another personage to be considered and that was no other than my double, Johnny, the Australian Crook. My lady of the highway had told me enough of his whereabouts so that I knew he was in this locality. But where was he and what was he doing? I dropped into a not very pleasant study. The woods were dense; the underbrush was thick and, far off, in the dim shadows lay the sleeping Castle. Had Johnny, the Australian Crook, got tired and gone home, or was he loafing in the woods?

There was no doubt about the wagon now and I

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dashed down the footpath, leaving her to face Bud and make her own explanation of the disappearance of his partner, Johnny, the Australian. As for the fate of Lady Hensington's wedding presents—if Bud got back to town in time—well, there's no need of borrowing trouble, and I certainly had enough on my hands.

CHAPTER XIX

THE STAIRWAY OF VINES

AND now for Florentine! I had not followed the little footpath more than a few steps before I saw that I was correct in my surmise. After leaving the high road it curved rather sharply to the left and I soon knew that it was bringing me back through the close trees which lay to the east of the Castle. By walking rapidly I found myself, in a few minutes almost under the Castle windows, though so compact were the woods that I was quite hidden by the shade.

Now that I had a chance to inspect it I discovered that the mansion on this side was very deep; it stretched back as far as the eye could follow it in the dark and it seemed made up of additions. There was the main building, tall and pretentious; then a large wing, and to this had been built another wing, still longer and reaching far back into an extension which I judged to be the servants' quarters. It was the typical old English castle, half decayed; its vines and brush bearing witness to the years in which it had lain asleep. I doubted, judging from the greyness of the stone and the dullness of the wood, if mortal hand had been put upon it in half a century.

I looked along the old east wall; it contained the sleeping-rooms of the family, and its windows, little

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squares of many panes, were numerous; one could imagine them twinkling with light but now they were black and lifeless.

The main building of the Castle did not interest me, so I crept along the east wing, looking upward, until suddenly I found myself under two windows brilliantly illuminated. There was a slight jutting out of the wall here so that I did not see them until directly underneath. I withdrew to reconnoitre. From Uncle Henry's description I judged these to be the windows of Sir Charles' room, a surmise which proved correct.

Scarcely did I have time to withdraw into the shadow, if there could be any deeper shade than that vouchsafed by the night itself which had grown black as Erebus, when the shade was run up and who should appear in the window but Sir Charles himself. I saw him clearly as he stood fully exposed by the brilliant glare from within. However feebly the other inmates of the Castle might be supplied with light Sir Charles had plenty of illumination.

He was looking out and glancing up and down the wall uneasily. It was almost as if he had a premonition of evil, for he leaned out of the window and studied the woods intently. I happened to be hiding under the very tree that grew beneath his window; the upper branches almost touched his shoulder. He stared straight down at the spot where I was, and I closed my eyes and held my breath for it seemed as though he must see me.

The minute lengthened into two, still he stared down. There was a slow movement in the bushes near me and the unexpected snapping of a twig; I

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dared not look around but my breath quickened for I knew that Sir Charles must hear it; something or somebody was moving near.

I thought instantly of Johnny, the Australian Crook, and if I had dared I would have dashed out. As it was I felt almost sure that Sir Charles must hear.

He did hear it for in his rough, raucous, rasping voice he called a hoarse: "Who's there?"

The rustle ceased and I could imagine that another breath was being held not so very far from mine for it had grown so still. But there was a silence, and only the wind lilted the trees.

Sir Charles was not satisfied. He lingered at the window, looking straight down at the tree trunk behind which I crouched. There was no repetition of the snapping and after a while he drew in his head, apparently convinced that the sound had been a figment of his fancy. Shortly afterwards his light went out.

But not until I had waited some minutes, to see if he returned to the window, did I venture to work my way along the east wall to the rear wing where Florentine's room was located. I had memorized Uncle Henry's directions so thoroughly that I knew it at once. But I stepped back into the trees and looked up, counting the windows as I looked. Yes, there it was! a room with a light burning dimly in it, a small glow that might have come from a candle that had been placed upon a dresser by someone who expected to return. Yet this tiny light high up in the dark was the minaret that would lead me to my lady.

I crept up closer to the house; the window of the

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room was open, but after a minute's inspection I decided that Florentine was not in her room; it would be useless—perhaps worse—to send up a signal.

The wall of the Castle was covered with vines; they were rough and of heavy growth, and, as I stood still gazing upward, I rested my hand upon them. Their stems were thick and gnarled, and, grasping them tightly, I discovered that the fibre was old and tough; they must have crept into the Castle stone with the growth of many a generation.

It would be quite easy to climb up.

Mechanically, I laid my hand in the dense growth of leaves, when, to my surprise, I found that my fingers were touching something solid, a substance that was neither leaves nor stems but firm and cold. I parted the green growth and saw the object. It was a flat stone and it extended out from the Castle wall for a distance of at least a foot. I put my hand underneath the stone to discover what supported it when my fingers clutched an iron bar that had been driven into the wall. I stooped and examined it the projecting stone was supported from underneath with a strong iron bracket; I stood up and let the vines spring back. Instantly they closed over the stone effectually concealing it from sight.

I parted the leaves again, wonderingly. Then its meaning flashed over me. It was a stone step. But why should it be there, hidden in the vines on the outer wall of the Castle? I could not even conjecture an answer. While I stood gazing at the step I let my hand wander upward and something aroused my suspicions. It was an iron ring. I parted the vines

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a little above the ring and there was another flat stone; it too, was a step, and it was held up by an iron bracket placed beneath. The masonry—for this step was nearer the level of my eye—I discovered to be of the finest.

A further search led to another. Like the rest it was concealed by the vines which hid it from casual view as effectually as though it were hidden by a screen. Rings were driven in the wall at frequent intervals.

One step rose methodically above the other.

The whole purpose was now clear. It was a stone stairway, and it had been built in the long ago by some Sir Knight. Who knows why? That it was not placed there temporarily was evident from the care with which it was constructed, for to build such a stairway on the outside of the wall, must have taken days of skillful masonry. The shape of the stones, the accuracy of their position and the strength of their supports told plainly that the stairway had been built by some member of the Hadley family, more or less eccentric, who had preferred to make entrance to his home in this peculiar manner.

Now the stairway, long since relegated to the limbo of disuse, was overgrown with heavy vines. But it was still very accessible and the vines rendered it easier to climb than if the stones had been naked and slippery.

I took one step up and poised myself upon the first stone, and leaned against the Castle. To my surprise my hand at once grasped the iron ring that had been driven by staples into the stone wall. One could walk

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up the firm steps, with hands securely locked in these hanging rings, or one could catch the vines. In either case it would be no difficult feat.

I wondered if Florentine knew of this stairway and if she ever made use of it. It led upward right to her chamber window.

How easy, I thought, for a person who wanted to gain access to the Castle to run up this outside ladder of stone and to enter Florentine's room, the door of which opened into the main hall. I was amazed at the carelessness of the family in leaving the Castle so exposed; then I reflected that the stairway was thoroughly concealed by the vines which hung two feet deep upon the house, and that no person, not knowing of its existence, would imagine it to be there. Still the wall was risky, for an athletic person could walk up the tangled, knotted vines even without stepping foot upon the stone stairway.

Leaving the house cautiously by keeping in the shadow and almost crawling in the heavy grass, I reached the nearest tree; it was not far from the mansion; and, from its shelter, though thoroughly covered myself, I could observe what went on in the Castle windows.

I crouched behind the tree, and, not daring to light a cigarette for fear of the light, I listened and waited.

I had not long to wait for a figure came stepping lightly toward me. I moved a little for I thought it was Florentine and I wanted her to know that I was near her. The figure came nearer, stopped short, and if it had been light enough to see, I should have said that it stared at me. I stared back. It was only

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for a second and then it was gone; it was scarcely more than an apparition, a shadow, but I had seen it.

My impulse was to go shouting after the man—for it was a man in top coat and soft hat—to head him off, or to frighten him away at least. But the futility of this was too apparent for any kind of argument. If I were to leave my post for one instant I might miss Florentine. And besides, to run unarmed in the dark woods would put me at a disadvantage that could only be stamped as foolhardy; he was my exact counterpart; both he and I had seen that—it was the Australian Johnny.

On the other hand, by letting him escape, suppose I were bringing danger to Florentine who might be in the dark woods.

So I stood still and waited, though this time with an impatience that was a positive agony. I clinched my fists and swore, and in my agitation I stepped out from the shelter of the tree. Where was Florentine? In another minute, defying consequences, I would dash across the open space and ascend the stone stairway, leading up to her window, to look for her.

My own opinion was that she was in the Castle and I watched her pane to see the light flare up. She would come to the window to pull down her shade and then I would see her and signal to her. To be sure, Sir Charles had said that she had gone back to London, but this I knew to be a falsehood. A thousand foolish fears possessed me.

I stood there in the woods, looking up at the window and cursing my cowardice. Why did I not dare to put foot in the vines and climb up the side of the

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house to the open window? At least I would know if Florentine had been there.

The minutes passed, I don't know how many. And then I thought I heard a rustle as of some light-footed person, and, out of the deepened shadows of the night, I saw a slender form creep around the house. It was Florentine, but before I could speak, she had grasped the vines and was going up the outside of the old Castle. With a surety of step that told me it was not the first time she had entered her room in that way, she swung herself up, using the stone steps and the rings, and in another instant she had stepped into her own window and disappeared.

But she was scarcely quicker than I; with a sudden determination I dashed out of the thicket into which I had retreated. I sped over the open space and reached the vine clad wall here, grasping the vines, just as Florentine had done, I swung myself up by taking step above step in the stones among the heavy growth, and noting, as I climbed, how firmly they had been fastened to the wall.

Three feet below Florentine's room I stopped and rattled the vines. In an instant she was at the open window, holding her hand to her heart in alarm.

I put up my finger for caution. Then, by signs and motions, I signalled to her to come out and join me in the woods.

I can say now, truthfully and candidly, that I did not know what was in my own mind when I beckoned her to follow me. And she declared afterwards that she did not know what emotion impelled her to pack her satchel and obey. But she came—down the stone

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stairway on the wall to the ground—and I stood below and caught her in my arms.

I know that I was thinking of Sir Charles as well as of Florentine, but mostly of Florentine; and she said later that she was thinking of Sir Charles and me, but mostly of me. I knew that I was a free man and that I could take her out of harm's way to the home of her Aunt Faith in London or elsewhere. Perhaps in my sub-conscious mind there was a premonition that it was not safe for her to remain in her room with that stairway on the wall leading straight up to her casement.

CHAPTER XX

ALONG THE NARROW TRAIL

SHE stumbled, and as I caught her, her hand flew to the breast of her gown; I remembered that she carried the pistol which she took from the coat of Sir Charles in the hall.

"Give the pistol to me," I advised as we hurried along the path striking a narrower trail which led into a still blacker woods.

She stopped still and looked at me.

"I gave it to you to-night in the woods," reminded she.

"You gave me the pistol to-night in the woods?" questioned I incredulously.

"Yes," she affirmed suddenly leaning against me for support. "I gave it to you over there, when I was returning from Pearl's lodge—don't you remember?"

My lapse of memory perplexed her; so I waited; then I said very gently: "Tell it to me, I have forgotten."

And, then, though much surprised, she related how she had gone to the little lodge with Pearl, and how, as she was returning, she had run right into me in the woods. Knowing that I was unarmed she had taken the pistol from her bosom and had handed it to me.

"You did not speak," she pursued, "but you took it

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and put it in your pocket! Don't you recall?" queried she, anxiously, "how dark the Castle looked except for the one bright light in Cousin Charles' room and how he came to the window and looked out?"

I nodded, too choked to speak.

"And he heard us, for he called 'Who's there?' and we stood motionless in the dark until he went back and put out the light."

Florentine told me further, but the fact of interest to me was that the poor girl had felt chilled by my manner, for I had said nothing but had slipped off into the woods, leaving her standing there.

"I told you not to use the pistol—if you could help it," declared she.

"Never mind," I replied absently, for I was thinking of my double, now armed and prowling in the woods—for it must have been he—and I remembered Sir Charles and the prodigious diamond which he had flashed so recklessly in the open road.

And I thought of the stairway on the wall.

"It had slipped my memory," I said reassuringly. But I thanked God that she did not lie sleeping in her room with that stairway of vine and stone offering open invitation to her window.

A great criminal lawyer once told me that man does not want to kill; but when he goes to steal that which a more generous fate has bestowed upon another, his hand becomes his enemy; he must cut and choke, slash and murder into silence all that lies between him and the thing he would possess; murder is a necessity, a hideous but an unavoidable afterthought.

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Quickly banishing such meditations from my mind I smiled reassuringly at Florentine.

"Where are we going?" I asked in a whisper, for she had become the leader.

She checked her steps. "Why, I don't—know," she said, "if—if you don't!"

"I'm going back to London and I'm going to take you with me—to be married."

"That is where I am going; but, first—now—right now—I must tell you."

She had paused in her rapid walk for we were now out of ear-shot of the Castle.

"I have seemed weak and not knowing my own mind," she began, "but it was only because I did not have time—I did not have a chance—to decide; my decision is now reached. I am running away with you to London, but I cannot become your wife."

"You must explain," I found words to say.

But her explanation was incoherent; the strain of the last few days, the fatigue and the sudden disclosure had all unnerved her, and she could not speak clearly.

But I learned that it was her intention to go to London and there to escape to foreign shores—far away from the Hadleys—in order that she might see and know her mother—the woman whom Aunt Faith had so horribly depicted to her to-night.

"She is my mother after all," sobbed Florentine, "and no matter what she is, I must find her; if she is bad, utterly worthless, so much the more reason why I should be with her.

"And she is young—scarcely twenty years older

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than I," she went on, speaking rapidly. "I have often pictured her—as I supposed she would have been if she had lived. But, oh,"—here her weeping broke out afresh—"the picture Aunt Faith showed me to-night—the awful photograph, the bold, staring eyes, the shameful gown—it seems too terrible—I must be in a nightmare!"

Florentine hid her face, turning her head away from me.

I took a cigar out of my pocket and, striking a match, I leisurely pulled the air current through the soothing roll of fragrant weed; even this slight exertion did me good.

She turned on me suddenly.

"I don't believe you are listening," she said.

"I'm not," I remarked coolly.

"But—you ought to know——"

"Not if it doesn't interest me," I observed.

"And now," returned I, "it is my turn to speak. I believe what you tell me about your mother, or I'm trying to believe it—but the fact is that two can travel more compactly than one. And after we are married—in London to-morrow—we will go to this—this mining camp where she is——"

"Do you mean to tell me that you do not care—even now that you know all?"

"That's what I'm saying," retorted I. "And we will talk the whole matter over some other time when——"

She brightened so that I knew where her heart led; and slowly we went on striking deeper into the woods.

It is something to be joyous and twenty; before we had proceeded far I had made her promise that we

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would be married as we planned. I saw that she had been a lady all her life; a belle much courted and petted; and it was difficult for her, all at once, to realize herself as a social outcast—a fact for which I was profoundly thankful.

"To-morrow," I said.

"Unless Cousin Charles stops us," she added white-lipped again.

"I'll murder him cold-blooded," I swore as we hastened our steps. "Now, no more of our troubles until I give you leave to speak of them again," I commanded with an assumption of authority.

And to this she agreed.

"But this path?" I questioned, "where does it go?"

"Oh, this footway is called the Sepoy cabin run; it cuts two miles off the way, and it leads straight to the London road. I've taken it many a time when I was a child; it is where Pearl, the Sepoy girl, used to bring me to visit her."

"Does Pearl live here in the woods?"

"Yes, that is her little lodge over there. She lives there with a servant, but, daytimes, if she is lonely, she comes to the Castle."

"I should think she would often feel solitary."

"Oh, it is pleasant enough in the day, and, when I am at the Castle, I frequently walk here to see Pearl; it is very near, and to-night——"

Florentine paused suddenly. "Oh, dear, I am so tired," she complained, "I feel as though I could not go another step."

"Let me help you," I returned, taking the satchel from her hand—I had previously tried to take it

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but she had deftly swung it away from me—"and, here, let us sit down awhile and rest."

Florentine sank upon a log over which I stumbled as I looked for a seat for her and I knelt by her side. It was densely dark, so dark that the blackness hung like a curtain around us. But, at one side of the path, a little higher, stood the tiny lodge in which the Sepoy girl lived. Florentine's eyes followed mine as I gazed at the light in the little house.

"Poor Pearl," she sighed, "I am so sorry for her."

"Is she unhappy?"

"Only that she loves Cousin Charles!"

"How can she love such a brute?" I asked, thinking of Sir Charles in all the unattractive guises in which I had seen him.

"Oh," said Florentine, avoiding my eyes, "it's an old story—they were together in India—and Pearl loved him—and when he came back—well, she followed."

"I don't wonder you say 'poor girl' if her happiness is tied up in such a creature as he."

The tears came into Florentine's eyes. "I can't tell you how sorry I am for her. And to-night when she heard or she thought—I was going to marry him she was almost beside herself with jealousy."

"Did she tell you?"

"Yes, the wretched girl told me—confessed it all—to me—how she had tried—to kill me——" Florentine stopped.

"Was it she who shot up the feather boa that was around my neck?"

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Florentine inclined her head in a gesture that meant yes.

"And were you out here in the cabin with her when we were searching for you?" I asked.

"Yes, the poor creature wanted so much to talk to me before she slept and she could say nothing before Cousin Charles. She saw the diamond he had brought for me, and was maddened by it. So, when you were reviving Mr. Pancoast, I slipped away with her; I was a comfort to her."

I felt relieved and I voiced it.

"Oh!" exclaimed Florentine, hiding her face in her hands.

"What is it?" I asked, adding a few terms to be found only in the lover's dictionary of words and phrases.

"Oh, it was so dreadful——"

"What——?"

"What she told me. I can scarcely believe it—that she would be so desperate——"

"Don't cry," I said, after the aimless fashion of man, as I found a seat on a log alongside her. "When you are married, Pearl will, perhaps, get the dear object of her affections back again."

"No, oh no! He has cast her off utterly, poor girl. And now she says there is nothing but to kill herself. Oh, it is—too terrible." Florentine shook as with a chill.

"Where did he get that wonderful diamond?" she asked.

I could not answer, and, as she still trembled, I talked as best I could, and we sat together and

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watched the light in the little lodge; Pearl was still awake and we saw her form in shadow as she moved about the room.

"She feels so conscience-stricken about—about to-night!"

"About to-night!——"

Florentine did not have time to explain for the light in the lodge went out. And a minute later, there was a muffled report, a pistol shot!

Florentine jumped to her feet with a cry.

"It is Pearl! She said she was going to take her own life."

She swayed, and before I could catch her she sank to the ground, a crumpled heap. I got down on my knees by the side of her and called her name; she did not answer; I begged her to speak, to move, to give some sign; but she was motionless. Poor child! I did not wonder for she had been through so much. I was almost relieved that she had lost consciousness, for she was breathing regularly and her cheeks though pale were warm. I took her hand and felt that her heart was beating steadily; it was nature's way of giving rest.

And then I did something for which I ought always to be sorry. I left Pearl in her cabin to her fate, and, stooping, I put my arms under Florentine and lifted her. Though she is not small she seemed light as a feather, and, throwing her across my shoulder, I made my way as fast as possible along the path in the woods to the open space beyond.

It was not until we had reached the end of the way where it opened into the road, that I stopped and

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laid my burden on the ground. She was still unconscious, but I did not need the first slant of yellow from the East to tell me that she was breathing; it was shock and exhaustion. At the side of the road there ran a little rill of water and I scooped up some of it in my hands and brought it to her. Slowly she opened her eyes and I could see that she knew me. She struggled to get up but at the exertion her breath came in little gasps. It was one of those interesting moments in life when something heroic ought to be said. But all I could think of was a miserable,

"How do you feel?"

And Florentine, as soon as she could speak, said she was feeling much better and she was sorry that she had been so much trouble and—where was the satchel?

I had forgotten it and I told her so.

"Oh, please—please go back and get it," she pleaded. She added that it wasn't very far and she must have it.

I reasoned with her but to no avail.

"It has something in it, something I want very much," she begged, "do please go back and get it."

"We'll buy a dozen just like it in Paris to-morrow," I protested.

But no, she must have the one that was in that satchel. So back I went along the wood road which was now quite distinct in the promise of the dawn.

I found the satchel just where we had left it, in sight of Pearl's cabin. I stooped to pick it up and, as I rose, I looked across the tree tops to the West. The

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turrets of the Castle were faintly outlined against the sky and I could imagine its inmates asleep in that heavy sleep of absolute unconsciousness which comes just before the dawn.

Involuntarily—I could not have told why—I took a few steps in that direction. Yes, there, like a vision of shadowland was the old building; its castellated turrets sharp now through the trees.

It was dark but I fancied I could see the vine-covered wall—and the outside stairway! And I knew that it led toward the room where Sir Charles lay heavily sleeping; how easy it would be to go and square accounts with him, now, even as he had tried to square them with me before.

The temptation was great and I wrestled with it. In the morning he would awake and I knew him too well to imagine that he would play an inactive part.

Yet there was Florentine; I could have no thoughts which I must shield from her clear eyes. I turned from the Castle and started back, satchel in hand.

“Oh!” an exclamation of pain broke from my lips. I stooped and felt my foot; I had stepped upon a sharp knife and the blade had run into my shoe.

I extricated the dagger—for dagger it was—and examined the sole of my shoe; the point had merely slit the inner leather.

Holding the dagger up in the semi-darkness I looked at it in wonder for it was of glistening steel and its handle was a marvel in Indian workmanship, silver and gold and mixed metals! Thrusting the trophy into my pocket I now hurried along—for I

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had delayed some minutes—but by half running I soon covered the distance.

When I returned, Florentine was on her feet, straightening her hat, and putting the intelligent little touches to her gown which women understand so well. She greeted me with a smile and I was delighted to see that there was color in her face once more.

"Now," said I, "you stay here while I go and look up a cab; there's usually a night hawk to be found between four and five in the morning even on a country road."

But Florentine said she would not let me go without her. So, together, we two, looking—well, Florentine laughed aloud as she got her first dawn glimpse of me—we two started along the high road to London, grip in hand, but lighter of heart than we had been for many hours. As for Florentine she never looked prettier, for she wore the neat little walking suit of the night before, and she had a marvelous method all her own of looking trim. But I thought as I caught a glimpse of my torn dress coat that a more disreputable looking customer than I never strayed into London.

"You were gone so long," she exclaimed.

"I stopped to get this," I answered reaching into my pocket for the dagger.

"Isn't it a beauty?"

She took it from my hand and gave one frightened glance at it.

"Why, it's a dagger," she cried, "and"—looking at her hands and mine—"it is covered with blood!"

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"Not blood!" I ejaculated incredulously, as I stooped to pick it up.

"It is blood," she shuddered, shrinking away from it; "and the dagger—oh, I know it well—I have seen it a thousand times—it belongs to Cousin Charles; for years he has slept with it almost at his hand, by the side of his bed."

"Florentine—are you positive?" I returned considerably shaken.

She reaffirmed what she had said.

"Then," pondered I, "how did it get into the woods, all covered with fresh blood, at this hour?"

To my surprise—perhaps because she had other troubles on her mind—Florentine did not seem troubled. "He must have thrown it away—and—perhaps a wounded animal stepped upon it."

It was very far from explaining matters to me but I was only too glad that she passed so lightly over that which was of most ominous import to me. In a minute she had forgotten it.

In the suburbs we had the good fortune to find a cab, and Florentine was smiling again as I helped her in.

"See," she said, "it is getting rosy in the East, and somewhere I think a skylark is singing."

I didn't care anything about the skylark, but, as I looked at Florentine and noted the pink flush in her cheeks, I hoped that a soft gay cloud was rainbowing the world for me.

"Do be careful of the satchel," she cautioned me as I flung it under the seat.

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"It's all right," I said and then I fell into a moody reverie from which Florentine roused me.

"What is the matter?" she asked, "I hope it isn't any more trouble," she added, nervously.

"Not trouble exactly, but I'm wondering where I am going to take you at half past four in the morning." This was one of my perplexities but I had to admit that I was also terribly oppressed by the uncertainties of the night, the outcome of which I was not yet to know.

"I could go to Aunt Faith's," she said doubtfully.

"And set the servants talking."

"Or to Lady Hensington's."

"And set all London gossiping! A nice news item it would be, how Roman Elliott, an American, had eloped with the reigning beauty of the London season, and how, pursued by her cousin, Sir Charles——"

Cousin Charles! It was an unfortunate reminder for us both.

Florentine frowned and bit her lip and then she made a thousand apologies—lest I should judge her forward for running off with me this way, for she thought I was reproaching her as men do reproach women who let themselves be led.

I put my head out of the cab and gave the driver an order.

"Now," I explained, "I've settled matters; you're to come to my apartment house with me. At the entrance there is a reception room and there you can remain until London wakes up. Meanwhile I will see what the combined efforts of two men, one of them a Japanese valet, can do, to improve my appearance."

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"You do look rather odd. Why!" she exclaimed as her eyes fell on my face, "your chin is badly hurt and—there's a big cut on your head "

"The bullet grazed my chin and I think I accumulated the head slash when the Constable forcibly made my acquaintance."

"And there's a terrible lump on your forehead—and it's turning blue."

"Experience often results in blueness," I said with the wisdom that befits my years.

I touched my chin to see if it was still bleeding, and this brought Florentine's mind back to the bullet. She put her hand over her eyes as if to shut out a memory.

CHAPTER XXI

THE LADY OF THE VIOLETS

BUT now we were in London, rattling over the pavements in the dim light of the grey dawn. "We are almost there," I assured her, "and you will soon be where you can rest a little while until the city wakens."

As I spoke we touched the Strand, and along we sped until we drew up in front of one of the most pretentious apartment houses in London, the smart structure in which Lady Hensington had taken a furnished flat for me.

I helped Florentine out of the cab and past the sleepy doorman, into the little reception room, where I saw that she was made as comfortable as its limited quarters would permit. Then I left her to go up to my apartment.

As I passed the desk I asked casually, and as a matter of course, if any mail had come for me. The clerk, reaching into my box, took out a letter. I glanced at it hastily; it bore a trans-Atlantic stamp and I saw that it was in Cousin Irene's handwriting. Mechanically I opened it for I knew what it would contain. An account of the doings of the foreign missionary society of Beverly; of the church work; gossip anent the Ladies' Club and the usual family happenings with some health hints from Irene. I ran

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my eye over it carelessly, then I perused it again, this time with care, and this is what I read:

Dear Cousin Roman:

It will not surprise you to learn that I have accepted the call to the American College at Constantinople. I will start for the college at once. You remember that I told you that I thought it my duty to teach the Turks and it is an old dream of duty come true in reality. I have wanted to go for years—the missionary prompting has been strong, but the trouble has been about father; I could not leave him to keep house for himself. Now, however, I have found a competent woman servant who will be cook and whose daughter is a capable waitress. The daughter has a husband who has references of ten years in his last place to show that he is a trusty butler, and old James, the coachman, has promised to remain. With such help the path seemed providentially made clear, and I am starting at once for that heathen land.

Father will go with me as far as Paris, as he has business in that city, and, as we are going to stop over in London, we will see you there. We sail to-morrow on the *Baltic*, and will be in London almost as soon as you get this letter.

Your affectionate Cousin,

IRENE.

I held the letter in my hand pondering; so Irene was on her way to Constantinople, and she and Uncle Jason would be here almost any day. I looked at the date of the letter and then at the sailing chart which hung over the desk.

"When is the *Baltic* due?" I asked the clerk.

"She got in Liverpool yesterday, sir," said the clerk.

"Then her passengers are in London now?"

I stood in front of the desk wondering.

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"I don't suppose you would know if a lady and gentleman, a lady with spectacles and an elderly gentleman, called on me yesterday."

The clerk woke up. "Why, yes, sir, there was a lady called here last night, and we let her go up to your rooms."

"Was she a young woman, rather short and thick-set, an American lady?"

The clerk looked doubtful.

"She wasn't short nor thick-set, sir, but she was an American, no doubt about that, and she said she'd go right up and it would be all right."

"Of course—of course!" I said hastily. "But was there an old gentleman with her?"

No, the clerk had seen no gentleman except the six or eight men who had called to see the lady—rather late—but, no! no elderly gentleman.

I thought at the time that the clerk was rather constrained in his manner, but I explained it then as being due to the hour, only I recalled it afterwards.

So six or eight gentlemen had called to see Irene late last night. It was a little strange for I had never known Irene to have a gentleman caller; during the whole length and breadth of her thirty odd years she has professed a vehement scorn for men as companions. Perhaps it was a mistake.

Well, they were here, and Uncle Jason evidently had gone to a hotel, leaving Irene to make herself comfortable in my apartment during my absence; still it was odd considering Irene's sense of propriety. I remembered, now, that I had left word that I did not know when I would be back and they had stupidly

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interpreted it to mean that I had gone out of town; but it did not matter so much.

So Irene, practical, commonsense Irene, with the square-toed shoes, and the broad, practical figure was here. And in the reception room was delicate high bred Florentine as different from Irene in type as a love bird is different from a sparrow. But I could now take Florentine up and the dear girl could smooth her feathers. Irene was a lady brought up to dispense New England hospitality, and would be nice to Florentine no matter how their ideals might differ.

In the reception room I found Florentine looking dainty and sweet and half asleep in a nest of pillows. I roused her though it seemed a pity to do so, and she said she wasn't asleep and wasn't tired and that she was perfectly comfortable where she was. I insisted, however, and, after I had explained matters, I put Florentine and the satchel in the lift and we went spinning up to my apartment.

"I suppose—of course—the lady isn't up yet," I said to the lift-boy, "that is, you haven't seen her this morning?"

It was a foolish question for it was hardly five o'clock. But his answer rather surprised me.

"No, sir, she ain't up yet, which ain't to be wondered at, sir, considering that she ain't been to bed long. Her company didn't go till morning, sir, and she's been singing most of the night since."

Singing! I did not recall the first hint of a musical bent in Irene as long as I had known her, and we were children together; certainly I had never heard of her singing until morning.

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"How delightful!" exclaimed Florentine, as we stepped out of the elevator, "I am sure I shall like your Cousin Irene; I do so like music."

We went along the dimly lighted hall to my parlor door and I put in the key and stood fumbling with the lock.

"There are six rooms in my suite," I explained. "This takes us into the parlor."

The key did not work; I had taken the wrong one, so I tried another. But before I could turn it, the door was opened cautiously and the head of Yama, my Japanese valet, shot out.

"Good!" cried he, when he saw me. "Very good! Much good! Beautiful business that you come home!"

Then, as his eyes rested on Florentine, he gave a click-click of dismay. "Wait minute, wait minute," he said. "Wait, I speak to you first."

Then followed a most extraordinary manœuvre. Yama closed the door in our faces and sped back through the rooms. We could hear the patter-patter of his slippered feet as he ran through the drawing-room and the rooms beyond. A minute later he appeared in the kitchen door of the flat and stood there beckoning wildly for me to come back and enter that way.

"Certainly not!" I said in some annoyance as I again put my key in the lock, "we will go in the drawing-room!" This time it was the right key and the door opened. Throwing it back I held it wide for my dear Lady Florentine to enter.

"Welcome to my home!" I exclaimed, "and to my hearth and sofa cushions."

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I got no further in the pretty little speech I was improvising, for I stopped in the utmost bewilderment and looked around. Florentine, too, stared in surprise, for an odor of violets pervaded the air, an odor that was heavy as a hot-house; and upon the chairs were violet silk belongings, lingerie, hosiery and tea gowns; and on the floor were piled gowns of all descriptions, pale violet and deep violet. On everything, on the tea table, the piano, and even on my desk, was heaped violet lingerie. The whole room billowed and cascaded with ruffles of violet and lace, while the unmistakable odor of violet sachet powder swept toward us in great heavy waves. We might as well have tried to pick our way through an importer's emporium. Through an open window there swept a breeze which stirred the dozens of violet silk hosiery that hung like badly behaved portieres over the chair backs.

"Great Spain!" I exclaimed.

Could this be the orderly little flat I had left behind only yesterday, and what had happened to it and how!

I looked at Florentine; after one glance around she had stepped back into the hall and I could see that her face had turned flame red.

A violet silk corset with strings yards long hung over the Venetian screen at the door.

"Wait, Florentine!" I cried, for she was heading for the elevator. "Wait and I will—I can—explain." Though how I was going to explain I didn't know. I looked for Yama, he was crouching in the doorway of the bedroom.

"What in Hell does this mean?" I demanded.

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Yama wrung his hands. "Much bad business, too bad, I say, too bad!"

"Of course it's too bad! What—why—didn't you tell me, you miserable heathen?"

Yama gesticulated and, keeping out of my way, tried to say that he wanted to tell me but that I would not give him a chance. I reached the bedroom door in two strides and grasped him by the shoulders.

"Whose clothes are these," I cried, "and where did they come from?"

Yama, with his finger on his lips, shook his head and pointed to the inner bedroom. I could dimly guess that there was an occupant, for there was a sound within, as of a nap disturbed and a long drawn out yawn; a sleepy feminine voice came floating out:

"Who's there?"

Yama chuckled and looked at me.

"She want many things, all time; much business to wait on her when she awake," he whispered.

The sleepy yawn, prolonged beyond all reason this time, came drifting from my bed chamber; I could guess that, like the drawing-room, it reeked of violets, and the voice, now petulant, demanded again to know who was there.

"It's Yama, Miss," replied my valet in the tone of one who has been subdued by experience.

An imperious feminine voice came sharply forth.

"Well, keep quiet out there, you Pussyfoot, and, if you can't keep quiet, then bring my cup of coffee."

There was no reply for Yama's tongue was temporarily paralyzed.

"Hello, there, Pussyfoot! Where are you?"

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"She call me the Pussyfoot all time," explained Yama with a grin, "because I walk so soft. She great lady, she been havin' callers all time since she came las' night. She say she goin' stay a week."

"Not if I know it," I remarked, with additions as I shook my fist at the bedroom door, but like Yama, my tones were low. "You tell her she can't stay an hour—get her out of here pretty quick, do you hear me?"

"Yes, sir, I try."

Then I dashed out into the hall after Florentine. Her nose was tilted at a slight angle, but she made no comment as I put her in the elevator.

"Your Cousin Irene is a lady of rather luxurious tastes," she observed as the lift touched the ground floor.

"Don't say a word now, Florentine," I begged.

I escorted her to the door and from somewhere, I don't know just how I managed it, I got a hansom and put her into it.

With an incoherent, "I'll be back soon," I dashed back into the house—providentially the clerk was not at the desk or I might have added real murder to my crimes—and upstairs to my apartment I went as fast as a lift can raise a man. Here I humbly begged admittance at the kitchen door, for I was still in my dress suit and my appearance was that of a man who had, to say the least, been out all night. I wanted to fight, but I had to take it out in asking for soap and water, for Florentine was down at the door in a cab and there was no telling what would occur in my absence.

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Yama brought fresh clothes out to the kitchen, and shaving water, and while he worked he chatted, with various savage interjections from me. There wasn't much to tell except that the lady arrived late the night before with many trunks and that she and Yama had been unpacking them nearly all night. During the intervals, between trunks, so to speak, the lady had enlivened the apartment with song and from time to time, as callers came to pay their respects, Yama had made fresh coffee. "Much coffee and cigarettes," he explained, as my glance took in the trays and the débris scattered around the usually spic-and-span kitchen.

"Yama busy most all night," he went on defensively; "she stay week, but Yama not stay here week; if she stay, Yama go."

"Don't you be in a hurry," I said. "What is she doing now?"

The clatter of a coffee cup and saucer rattling down upon the hard wood floor of my bedroom answered the question.

"After she drink, she threw cup and saucer out of bed on floor," explained Yama; "she spoil two rugs."

I hadn't time to hear more for Florentine was waiting down in the hansom and my appearance now, while not quite up to usual form, was certainly much improved.

I took the lift and dropped to the ground floor; at the desk stood the clerk. I would stop a second, just long enough to make a few inquiries about my violet house-guest, and then! But, before I reached the

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desk, a fresh surprise greeted me, one that drove everything else out of my mind.

"A lady and gentleman to see you in the reception room," said the hall clerk.

"A lady and gentleman to see me!" I exclaimed.

"Yes, sir!"

"When did they arrive?"

"A minute ago, sir, and they said they'd wait, sir."

Here was a situation!

Out, in a carriage at the door, sat my fiancée—in what frame of mind I did not dare to guess.

Upstairs, in my bachelor apartment, was an unnamed and unmentionable lady, soaked in violet and flirtatious with silk lingerie.

And, in the reception room, awaiting me, just from the *Baltic*, sat a lady and a gentleman.

CHAPTER XXII

COUSIN IRENE AND UNCLE JASON

THE worst had come, the blow had fallen and I knew it. I did not need to look into the reception-room to know who was there. Collecting my scattered senses, I walked over and peeped in.

There they were! Upon the sofa, with her bags and bundles methodically arranged around her, sat Irene! And by her side, his genial face aglow with pleasurable anticipation, stood Uncle Jason.

I stepped into the reception-room and held out my hand to them. I could not speak. Uncle Jason grasped it and taking my silence for emotion, he shook it until the tears came into my eyes. As for Irene, she laid aside her handbag and arose, and, as I stooped to greet her, she planted a cousinly kiss on my face.

"Well, how are you—how are you!" ejaculated Uncle Jason, "you're an early bird all right. But it's none too early to see the sights of this town. Why, I've been out and looked in some of the windows, and I'll bet there's more bargains in London than in any other city in the universe."

"Father went bargain hunting while I stopped in the ladies' writing-room at the station to send a post-card to the Dorcas Society," explained Irene.

"And I found 'em, too, and as soon as the stores open——"

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"And I must send a post-card to the Ladies' Club of Beverly," said Irene.

And then they began asking me, both at once, how I was, how I had been, and whether I liked London, and if they had taken me by surprise coming the way they did. I said "yes" and "no" and "all right" to everything, and while I answered the personal catechism I debated what I would do with them—and with Florentine out in the hansom at the door. If Florentine stood this ordeal pleasantly, I was reasonably sure of a brick of a wife.

I looked at Uncle Jason; his sturdy form clad in the serviceable suit of a wideawake New England business man, gave me confidence; he might be bald, but his round pink face and his honest blue eyes showed a world of good nature. As for Irene! I must confess that Irene was a problem, but I would tackle it.

"Come," I said to Uncle Jason, when we had talked enough, "come with me, I want to tell you about something."

"It's a bargain, isn't it?" he cried delightedly, picking up his hat. "You stay here, Irene, I'm going out for bargains."

"No, it isn't a bargain," I said, when I had got him out into the hall, "it is a girl. The truth of it is that I'm in a deuce of a scrape and, well! you've got to help me out of it. Do you want to hear all about it now?"

"I'm a Yankee," replied Uncle Jason. And I could see the curiosity gleaming in his eyes.

"Well, listen!" I said. And before I knew it I had poured into his ears the whole tale of the night be-

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fore. He knew of my contemplated marriage to Florentine, of how Sir Charles had tried to stop it, and how we had had to fly to London at midnight.

He smiled delightedly—bless his sympathetic old heart—when I told him that Florentine was out in a cab, waiting for me and that we were to go to her Aunt Faith's house to be married as soon as possible, for I thought I knew a way to get Aunt Faith over to our side.

He was all attention until I had finished. Then he exclaimed, with a hearty clasp of the hand:

"I'm with you. But, by George, I'd like to take a fall out of that Sir Charles."

I did not tell him—a thing I afterwards deeply regretted—the whole truth about Sir Charles, for I did not mention the Hepworth diamond, nor did I harrow his soul with a tale of Johnny, the Australian Crook, my double! There were many points of mystery, which for reasons I now know to have been unwise, I kept to myself.

Nor did I breathe a word about Lady Hensington. I did not want my uncle to know that I had acted the part of a gentleman detective at the wedding reception the night before, nor for the world would I have told him I had defected my trust, even to save a girl from a marriage that was utterly loathsome to her.

And, at best, I had merely promised Lady Hensington that I would watch the Hepworth until she could get someone else.

As for Florentine's secret—her family disgrace—I came as near to it as I dared when I said:

"Uncle Jason, would you marry a woman whose—

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family history—was not all it should be—not quite conventional?”

My uncle's reply startled me:

“I don't know what I would do myself,” he replied, with a New England wink, “but I know what I'd tell a boy of mine he ought to do! I'd say, ‘My son, try to get a girl who is good enough to sit down at the table with your mother. These ladies of doubtful creed are all right for wise old guys like your father, but you—my boy—are too young to play with matches.’”

“But if it was only her—family—say her mother!”

“She'd come calling, and then it would be Hell!” ejaculated my relative. “You can be damned glad Florry's an orphan! One of these days it'll be your Plymouth Rock duty to go and throttle that cousin of hers. If it is money he's after—be a good sport and buy him off!”

This was not quite the answer I wanted, but I had to be contented.

“Never mind about Sir Charles! The thing now is for you and Irene to stand by and help.”

“We'll do it, and if Aunt Faith makes any kick-up, I'll buy her the best brooch in London. I saw one at a bargain this morning; it was in one of the windows on this street.”

“Never mind bargains nor Aunt Faith now,” I answered, “but think of Florentine, poor girl.”

“Is she pretty?” asked Uncle Jason.

I tried to tell him how very pretty she was, but words failed me.

“I'll take a look at her myself,” he decided. And, before I could stop him he was out at the cab and I

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was introducing him to Florentine and they were shaking hands and telling each other how very pleasant it was to know each other.

"Go and bring Irene," ordered Uncle Jason.

I wanted to tell him to go himself, but the old rascal had climbed into the hansom and was busy talking to Florentine. I could hear him asking her where the best bargains could be found, and what she wanted for a wedding present, and if she was going to make me behave after I was married; and Florentine was getting redder and redder, but enjoying it immensely. It was "Florry" with Uncle Jason right away!

And now for Irene.

I found my cousin still seated on the sofa in the reception room. She had drawn a post-card from her Boston bag and, with the help of the bellboy, was describing London to the Ladies' Club at home. I waited until they had finished, then my cousin, closing her bag with a snap turned to me.

"Put down your bag, Irene," I begged. "I want to talk to you."

Reluctantly she let it go out of her grasp, but she still kept one eye on it as it lay on the sofa and she might as well have held it. The handbag is a disease which attacks the Boston lady with great virulence, and I verily believe the Boston lady would rest more comfortably in her coffin if she had her Boston bag in her hand. Irene moved uneasily and picked up the bag and laid it in her lap. Then she crossed her hands and said:

"Well?"

The lady upstairs was like a nightmare on my mind

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and I knew that something must be done before Florentine saw Irene. I looked at Irene; my cousin had sensibly raised her skirt in front to keep it from getting dusty on the floor and her two capable feet, broadly displayed, hinted at plenty of sole. Irene liked solid things, and the sofa cushions by her order had been removed to the further corner of the couch. Sofa pillows are a great comfort or a great nuisance; according to the woman; to Irene they were a nuisance.

"Well?" she repeated, straightening her rimless spectacles.

"Irene," I asked suddenly and without preparation, "do you like violets?"

"I despise them," answered Irene. "They are enervating and a sufficient number of them will produce insomnia; they should never be tolerated in the living or sleeping-room. Even their color is bad, for it is well known that the violet pigment is saturated with a fluid which acts detrimentally upon the optic nerve. Applied to the skin it is still worse, for it is an irritant."

"Irene," I pleaded, "would you do something to *please* me?"

Irene hesitated; the Boston lady does not like to commit herself.

"Irene," I went on so earnestly that my voice shook, "will you say that you like violets and that you *do* love violet color—even if you don't?"

"But, my *dear* Roman!"

"Never mind, Irene, don't ask me why. But I'm going to buy you some violet silk lingerie and I want

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you to pack it in your suit case, plenty of it so it sticks out, falls out, protrudes, cascades, anything, just so—somebody—I mean everybody will think that you do wear violet lingerie.”

“Roman!”

Irene looked at me so suspiciously that I felt sorry for her. Once upon a time a relative of ours went suddenly insane and had to be taken to the asylum. She was only a half-sister of Irene’s step-grandmother and the insanity was of the harmless order. But I know that Irene was thinking of her as she sat there on the couch, staring at me. As for me I discovered that I was kneeling on a cushion at her feet.

“Do you *care* for me, Irene, and do you *want* to make me happy?”

Irene’s brow cleared; she understood now, and it was not insanity! But she wanted the matter settled and as soon as possible. Her lips tightened.

“Cousin Roman,” she said severely, though in the half-gratified cadence which a woman always has on tap for such a moment. “Cousin Roman, this is the third time! And, as on each previous occasion, I must say no. You proposed to me once when we were nine, and again when we were thirteen, but I had to tell you that I could not marry you, and again I repeat it, no!”

“Thank you, Irene, or no, I mean, yes! But the violet lingerie, *may* I buy it for you?”

“How *highly* improper!”

Tossing her head and gathering up her bags and baggage my cousin Irene swept out of the reception-room and out of the door to where Uncle Jason and

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Florentine still sat in the cab, chatting together and laughing in a way to scandalize the neighborhood at that hour of the morning.

"Say, Irene—please, Irene," I gasped, clutching her gown.

She turned and for the first time she saw me by daylight. Something in my forlorn appearance must have appealed to her, for she stopped and let me speak to her. She would never tell me what I said nor how I said it, but when I had finished Cousin Irene understood that I was engaged to be married and that the girl of girls was the one in the cab.

"And Irene, *do* say you like violets," I concluded. Whether Irene began to tumble or not, I don't know; but she was her father's daughter, and there was a wise look in her spectacled eyes as I introduced her to Florentine. Then she got into another hansom with me and she let me buy her a tiny little bunch of violets no bigger than a cork. For Florentine I got a bunch of lilies of the valley that emptied the florist's stall.

Uncle Jason had wheedled Florentine into saying that she was hungry and the two hansoms rolled over to the Cecil where we all got out for breakfast. It was Uncle Jason's breakfast and we sat down to a feast that for bounty could not have been beaten in the feudal days. To Uncle Jason's regret there was no fried mush nor doughnuts, but he smothered his discontent when Florentine declared that she could not have eaten any if there had been a platter of them. Once or twice during the breakfast the conversation

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approached dangerously near to forbidden topics, as when Irene said:

"In what color is your bedroom furnished, Cousin Roman? I brought a brush broom holder from home and it is pink——"

"It goes charmingly with violet as you know, Irene," I said with a telling glance.

"But your room, is it a violet room?"

"You know perfectly well it is violet," I replied. And this time I stepped on her foot so violently that Irene said, "Yes, of course!"

I knew at once that I ought to have informed Irene that she was supposed to have occupied my apartment the night before.

But when I saw my cousin's clear cut ways and her sensible tailor-made clothes, I knew the futility of it. The frou frou of violet petticoats, the billowing laces, the portierre of waving hosiery and the countless yards of silken string were all too much at variance with my cousin's external severity to be reconcilable. Yet I grasped at a wisp.

"You know my room is violet," I repeated.

And Florentine, wise little girl, took no notice.

The two young women had taken to each other at once as opposite currents attract.

Florentine, beautiful, high strung and romantic, possessed a magnetism for Irene, capable, pushing and practical. There was a mutual admiration, and, as they conversed, each was unconsciously taking a leaf from the life book of the other. If only I could keep them from comparing notes until I could see Irene alone.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE MISSING HEIRLOOM

AFTER breakfast Irene and Uncle Jason left us; Uncle Jason said we ought to be alone awhile to plan, but before he went away my Uncle put down in his memorandum book the full name and address of Aunt Faith with a little diagram of how to reach her house by the most direct route.

I promised when we had finished our conversation to put Florentine in a cab and send her to Aunt Faith's, for it wasn't strictly according to propriety, Irene said, to run off and leave us in this manner.

But Cousin Irene, later, did permit, and force herself to admit that circumstances did alter cases, as when she herself, ignoring the proprieties, went all alone to buy a winter overcoat for the minister the day the married ladies were all too busy to go—yet it was a deed that might have created talk!

So we sat there, Florentine and I, in the little breakfast room of the Cecil, and the dear girl let me light a cigarette which I sadly needed as a nerve soother. I smoked while she sat and watched me.

We tried to seem care-free, but there hovered over us the shadow of a nameless dread,—a thing of which we did not dare to speak; but I saw it in her eyes and she beheld it mirrored in mine. The day was here but we knew that it would bring trouble to us, though how swift we did not then foresee.

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At her side rested the satchel which she had never allowed to get out of her sight one instant. I was bound to be cheerful as long as I could, so I exclaimed as her eyes wandered toward it anxiously for the thousandth time:

"Now tell me what is in that precious satchel?"

Florentine blushed.

"I'm dying of curiosity," I pleaded.

"It is a gown!"

The satchel was small and my legal aptitude for logic told me that it must be a dress that could be compactly folded. I sat stirring a cup of after-breakfast Bohea and thinking; I drained the cup and inverted it over the saucer and revolved it three times as I had seen a soothsayer do at Coney Island.

"Suppose, when I turn this cup, that the tea leaves tell me it is a traveling dress," I hazarded, "would they be correct?"

"Ye-es," admitted Florentine, "I had no gown at Aunt Faith's that would be suitable, so I brought one along."

As this was the first intimation I had had that a traveling dress was really on the schedule, it was hilarious news indeed.

It was a good thing that the breakfast room at the Cecil was dim, and that the waiter, having got Uncle Jason's tip, American size, had gone away, for I reached right over the table and squeezed her hands and held them fast until she begged for them.

"And that reminds me," said Florentine, "of my ring."

"Your ring, sweetheart?"

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"My mother's ring; it was to be my wedding ring!" Her face flushed painfully.

"Where is it and must I leave you to go and get it?" I hastened to say.

"I dropped it last night at Lady Hensington's, but I know where it fell; it rolled under the big palm in the front drawing-room, where I stood looking for you. I wear it always by a gold cord around my neck as a talisman,—a symbol of what I supposed—but last night the cord snapped——"

"It shall be a symbol of a perfectly rounded life together!"

"I think," she added with a touch of sentiment, "that the cord must have parted just at the very moment I saw you."

I am not going to describe my sentiments, nor to record what I said, but I went quite off my head. There was about Florentine none of the arrogance that goes with great beauty; she did not have that snob-bishness that leaves a woman's face so pitifully plain when beauty has fled. But the attitude of trying to charm was new to me. Observation, aided by the classics, had taught me that, if a woman likes a man, it is part of the feminine campaign to make him think that she does not; she treats him like a dog. What wonder, say I, if he turns out to be a brute!

The clock hands were rolling round and the breakfast room was filling.

"Nine o'clock!" I exclaimed, "it is too early for Aunt Faith's household to be astir."

Florentine said no, so I took her out and put her in a cab, waving an adieu, as she drove off for Aunt

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Faith's abode. We had left the dear old lady at the Castle the night before, but I knew that she would return to her own domicile as soon as possible, for the society of Sir Charles at the Castle would be none too agreeable to her.

Sir Charles! My last view of him at the window still sent a shiver through me as I recalled his suspicious, terror-struck face, lighted by the glare of the room behind him.

And now for Lady Hensington. And here I must confess I had my misgivings as well as my qualms of conscience. How had that lady fared and how would she greet me after my desertion of last night? I wanted to be perfectly fair with her and I did not intend to spare myself, but there were certain clauses in our contract of which I intended to remind her if necessary.

I drove around to Grosvenor Square and alighted in front of her door. The vestibule stood wide open and doormen and draymen were busy bringing out cases. I knew these to be the wedding presents which, having done duty the night before, were now to be shipped to the ancestral palace of the ducal son-in-law, in Italy. They were of all sizes and shapes, for Lady Hensington had been buying up treasure chests for weeks.

"They look so imposing," she had explained to me when I asked her why she had nine Spanish coffer boxes.

I made my way past the treasure chests and through the front door and into the drawing-room. To my

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surprise, I found Lady Hensington there and waiting for me.

"I have sent to your apartment six times since seven o'clock," she said, glaring at me, "and now you may tell me where you went when you disappeared last night and where you have been this morning."

I muttered some feeble apology.

Lady Hensington broke forth. Her speech was rather mixed, but the clearly-to-be-understood thing was that I was no gentleman. I had gone away without paying my respects to her; I had sent an impudent man from Scotland Yard to watch the wedding presents, and she had discharged him and—well—a turquoise brooch, set in filigree, had been stolen.

"Anything else?" I asked.

Lady Hensington glared at me.

"Was the diamond all right?" I asked.

"I don't know," was her astonishing reply. "I was so disturbed that I didn't examine it, but the Scotland Yard man handed me the velvet box which contained it and I locked it away in my private treasure box early this morning."

"Then it is safe," I observed with relief.

"Small thanks to you," sniffed she. "What have you got to say for yourself?" she inquired, after an awkward pause.

At this instant I chanced to glance down at the carpet and there under the palm—just where she had dropped it—lay Florentine's ring—her mother's wedding ring, the ring that was to be *our* ring!

"Nothing," I said.

Lady Hensington rose, the fire flashing from her

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eyes. I rose, too, but I kept my gaze on Florentine's ring. I wanted to stoop and pick it up but Lady Hensington advanced a step toward me and I did not dare.

"I ought to have you arrested, Roman Elliott," she said threateningly.

"Don't do it, Lady Hensington," I begged.

"I would if it were not for the memory of your father."

Lady Hensington advanced another step, her voice rising and her eyes snapping.

"Father's shoes would be rather too large for me so I never try them on," I retorted with spirit.

Florentine's ring was almost under her foot. Would I dare to stoop and pick it up or was it unsafe to bend over and expose myself in that defenseless position at such a time? I gave the ring a kick, bent strategically and got it and put it safely in my vest pocket.

"What are you going to do about that turquoise brooch?" she demanded. "I've asked you three times and you haven't heard me."

"Buy another," I suggested.

"I've thought of that," she declared, "but it is from the De Chambrey family, and it's an heirloom; was stolen from the palace in Venice, 1310, I believe, and recovered in eighteen hundred and something in Naples."

"Well, tell them it was stolen from this palace on Grosvenor Square in 1900 and something—and you don't know when it will be recovered." I spoke sharply, for old turquoise brooches set in filigree went

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pale compared to two turquoise eyes framed in glory.

"Roman, you are impossible," declared Madame, "and since you are of no use to me, you may as well go."

I picked up my hat, cautiously keeping out of her way. Perhaps I did her breeding an injustice, but her foot looked menacing.

"By-the-by," she said, "they tell me that a man came here last night, or rather, he came this morning, just as the guests were leaving, and that he was the image of you. The doorman let him pass for you. He went up to see the wedding presents, and afterwards, went out to supper."

"Perhaps it might have been I," I said foolishly enough.

"Oh, he cut his oysters in half, put sugar in his claret and ate two plates of soup," said Lady Hensington conclusively.

"Perhaps then, he is the man who stole the turquoise brooch," I replied as I backed into the hall.

Lady Hensington gasped!

Here I thought it a good time to go before she recovered; so I said my *au revoirs* and departed, promising to call again that afternoon.

The butler, perhaps at a signal from Lady Hensington and perhaps by accident, slammed the front door behind me and I stood upon the front steps, *persona non grata* in the house of my client.

In my anger I almost wished that I had not come to London. I might have been at home, motor free and soul satisfied with the other members of the law firm of Bunnestead, Worthington & Co., instead of

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standing here crushed figuratively; it was because I was too obliging that this humiliation had come upon me. I could have sent one of my partners to London. There was Bunnestead. He might have come over himself to help Lady Hensington with the settlements, for she was afraid of the English lawyers. But, no, Bunnestead had retired twenty years ago at the age of sixty-five to die of old age at his country seat up the Hudson. I had seen him but once since I joined the firm ten years before. Then it was with regard to putting my name on the firm stationery that I took the pilgrimage up the Hudson.

Eloquently I had laid the case before him; "I can't do it, my boy," he had replied. "You will have to be the 'Co.' until I die."

When I pressed him to tell me why I must wait until the coming of so sad and so distant an event, he leaned forward and winked at me.

"Because the firm name would be too long to go on one line in the telephone directory," he said in a shrewd whisper.

So it was for alphabetical reasons that I could not add my name to Bunnestead and Worthington.

But there was old Worthington. Why couldn't he have come over upon the dubious knight-errantry of keeping a few of Lady Hensington's stars and garters from falling into the hands of her daughter's marquis? He at least would not have fallen in love, being now seventy-one. But a whimsical picture of Worthington at his desk tore across my vision; Worthington who came down at eleven each morning, and whose daughter, a maiden of fifty, brought him his luncheon

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each day at twelve. At two Miss Worthington had always—since the office cat could remember—come down to get the napkin in which she brought her father two crackers and a lump of cheese. And while Miss Worthington was folding up the napkin and showing the cat where to find the crumb, old Worthington would go down and climb into the boat-shaped old Victoria.

It was evident that I was predestined to come. And when I thought of the Honorable Florentine Hadley I wanted to thank Fate.

So my double had been there, but at what hour? And how long it was after I had seen him skulking in the woods around the Castle I could not tell! My foreboding became a heavy cloud that darkened my spirits. There had been mischief afloat the extent of which I did not know.

My impulse was to return to Lady Hensington and get further particulars from her regarding the turquoise brooch—and to make sure that nothing else had been stolen by my double. But her offended manner told me that she was in no mood to talk to me.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE VIOLET LADY AGAIN

MY cab was at the front door and I felt that now, as a Christian duty, I must go to the apartment house and straighten matters out at my flat before going to Lady Faith's decorous abode; but I shuddered, even as I trembled and wondered, when I thought of the violet sachet and my violet bestrewn parlor.

Never put off until to-morrow what you can just as well do to-day; that is a maxim that originated in Boston, and it is used at housecleaning time.

I would return to my apartment at once.

I gave the coachman the direction and settled back; the cushions were soft and I know I fell asleep for my next consciousness was that I was being violently shaken by the arm. I opened my eyes and came gradually back to the present. As I recovered myself I saw that the cab stood in front of my own door, and on the sidewalk, in a group, were the night clerk, the day clerk and the manager, all talking excitedly.

I stepped out and they followed me inside, still in conversation. My head was confused by the few minutes of sleep, but amid the voices I caught the humble apology of the manager. He had been away, and in his absence a lady had come and asked for my keys. As she had represented herself to be my sister

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the night clerk had given them to her, and, of course, it was all a mistake, for the lady was the sister of the former occupant of the apartment, who had recently sub-let the rooms to me, and ought not to have been there at all! Would I be kind enough to overlook the error as the lady had departed and as it was a rather excusable blunder.

"Inexcusable, you mean," I said bluntly.

"Perhaps!" agreed the manager. "But," as he again explained, "the lady had insisted upon going to her brother's apartment, and since she was a light opera star of so much note—and afraid of the London fog—it had seemed best to give her the keys. It was at that late hour when ladies do not like to hunt for lodgings; and she had been rather insistent in the matter of gaining admittance."

After I had grudgingly forgiven everybody, the manager took me aside and whispered the lady's name to me. He was right, I agreed, and it would have been wrong to turn so prominent a personage out in a drizzling London midnight, for I recognized that my little flat had had the honor of sheltering one of the most noted songbirds of the variety stage. She had arrived on the *Baltic* only the night before for a six weeks' season in London, and, of course, the London vaudeville stars had come at midnight, after the show was over, to welcome her to their shores. It was all quite simple now.

But the manager was distressed because Yama had told them of my hasty visit home and my hurried departure. And the fact that I was asleep in the cab in front of the door simply went to show that I pre-

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ferred the hospitality of the cab to that of my own flat, under the circumstances.

"Sorry you had to sleep in the cab, sir," said the manager for the tenth time. And for the tenth time I assured him that it didn't make a damn's difference now.

I got into the lift and went up to my apartment, and, touching the bell, I waited for Yama to open the door, which he did slowly and at nose width only.

"Open the door," I exclaimed.

Yama cracked it gingerly and I stepped in. Immediately he closed it behind me, the windows of the room were shut and the atmosphere was stifling with violet.

"Open the windows," I ordered, "and air this room."

Yama shook his head violently. "Keep sweet smell in," he said. "If you let window up sweet smells all fly out."

"Never mind if the sweet smell does fly out," I retorted, tossing up the shades and throwing the windows wide open. "Phew! But it is strong here!"

Yama protested, but to no avail. I aired the room and looked about for any remaining traces of the lady of the violets. I afterwards learned that she had left a long, pale violet, silk opera stocking behind, hip length and suitable for the ballet, and Yama, finding it, had taken possession of it. When I discovered it, it was strapped to the outside of my dress suit case, for Yama, recognizing its fitness as an umbrella cover, had slipped my silk umbrella and two walking sticks into it. I did not see it until—well, too late to prevent

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the catastrophe! All seemed clear of violet as far as visible evidence was concerned.

While we were airing the parlor, there came a tremendous thumping at the door. I opened it myself, and in the hall stood a violet vision that fairly knocked my eyes out. In her hand was an ivory headed parasol, which she had used as a door rapper.

"It is her; the lady who sleeps in your bedroom," whispered Yama, getting behind the door so that he could hear all that went on without being seen.

The vision smiled serenely and there was a wonderful frou frou of violets as she let down her train.

"I came to see you, to call on you," she said with a telling glance, "in order to apologize. The manager put me in the wrong apartment, and when he discovered his mistake early this morning, he moved me to another, and now I'm off to find something better."

I bowed stiffly, but she took no notice of any lack of cordiality.

"No, I won't stop this morning," she went on sweetly. "Some other time, but if you find a long violet silk stocking, opera length, comes right to the hip,"—indicating its length by a slight gesture of hand and foot,—"you can send it to me. Unless——"

I glared at her but she smiled archly, "unless you would like to keep it as a souvenir of—of the visit."

She picked up the yard of violet silk train which lay upon the floor of the marble hall, and pirouetted on one dainty French heel.

"If any of your baggage is left behind it will be sent to you," I growled.

"Well, good-bye; say so-long to Pussyfoot for me."

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And away she went down the hall, her French heels tap-tapping as she walked.

I closed the door abruptly and turned to find Yama squatting behind it like a Japanese monkey. I frowned at him, but he had his eyes closed and his nose in the air, taking ecstatic sniffs of the fresh waves of violet.

"Get up," I ordered, "and pack a trunk and a suitcase, and put everything in for a month."

"Yama go along?" he asked.

I told him that he was not to go, and I added a few other remarks, wholly unnecessary—for he was not to blame—but I was put out by the violets.

And now for Aunt Faith. The dear lady had undoubtedly returned from the Castle, and I would be in time for eleven o'clock tea and would see Florentine. So it was with delightful anticipations that I stepped into the cab and gave Lady Faith's address to the driver. The morning was clearing.

But on the way I signaled him to stop at a shop, for I wanted to give Florentine a solitaire which would tell her that I valued her love as highly as a Bond Street jeweler could suggest, and I wished to put on her hand a ring whose flashing sign would speak the words I was too dull-witted to utter.

I picked out the diamond to the joy of the Bond Street dealer, and, with the token tucked in what the lady-who-loves-me calls my heart pocket, I drove to the home of Lady Faith, and up the front steps I bounded in two leaps. The footman let me in and I stepped into the prim gold-and-white drawing-room sacred to Aunt Faith and the memory of the Prince

THE VIOLET LADY AGAIN

of Wales. I had time to observe it all now; his portrait hung over the mantel and there were innumerable pictures of the royal family scattered about. The house in the daytime looked even more devoted to royalism than at night.

I had only a few minutes to wait in the drawing-room before Florentine appeared, and without delay I gave her the ring. I suppose there have been other engagement rings in the world, but none I am sure like this, for it was Florentine's ring and mine!

If there are critical moments in life, crucial moments, this is one, the moment of the giving of the ring; for the happiness of a couple's whole future life depends upon the way this ring passes from hand to hand. Florentine took it and put it on and said just the right thing. Then she looked into its sparkling depths with wonder, but when I asked her what she saw, she would not tell me. But she said she understood now why the diamond is called a precious stone.

"I found the wedding ring," I added.

A sunbeam brighter than the diamond darted into the little gilt drawing-room and rested upon her hair, that lovely silver hair which had become tangled into the woof of my existence like silver threads caught in a fabric of dull grey. The sunbeam flashed upon the diamond and Florentine said it was an omen.

At the same time she put her finger to her lip and lifted it with a dear little gesture and a sidewise movement of her head:

"Listen!" she exclaimed.

CHAPTER XXV

UNCLE JASON PLAYS ALADDIN

I LISTENED and heard that which I had not noticed before, a low hum of voices; they issued from the tiny reception room across the hall; one was very soft and sweet, low and well modulated; the other brusque but kind, hearty, round and satisfied.

Florentine's smile deepened until a roguish dimple sat in each cheek.

"It is Aunt Faith and your Uncle Jason," said she.

"Uncle Jason! How did he get here?" I exclaimed.

"He came almost directly," explained Florentine.

"He said he was looking for a bargain in real estate in this neighborhood, and, finding himself so near here, he thought he would drop in to make us a morning call."

"And Aunt Faith?" I questioned with some misgivings.

"Oh, Aunt Faith liked him immensely; I never saw her so taken with anyone. She was just getting out of her carriage as he reached the front steps, and when he saw her he went down and insisted upon helping her. It was most fortunate, for the carriage step was wet and Aunt Faith slipped and would have fallen; she did wrench her ankle slightly."

What an opportunity for Uncle Jason, I thought, as I recalled my **uncle's** well **known** gallantry.

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"And he was so kind to Aunt Faith; he brought down the door mat and spread it over the wet sidewalk and found a board somewhere, which he laid over the gutter, so that she could reach the walk without straining her ankle."

"How delightful!" I exclaimed. "He has Sir Walter Raleigh beaten to a finish."

Florentine laughed again as she related the rest of it. She herself had introduced them, and Aunt Faith—now that it could be done with propriety—had shaken hands with him, and invited him to stay and have a cup of tea, which was undoubtedly what Uncle Jason had intended to do from the first.

It was a captivating little romance, and while Florentine was telling me, the hum of conversation went steadily on in the little reception room beyond; occasionally a ripe laugh broke forth in Uncle Jason's hearty bass voice.

It seemed a pity to interrupt them but I had to do so; there were many things to be done, and in the interval of conversation—while I was giving Florentine the diamond—she had promised that we would be married that evening.

"Mr. Pancoast will be well by that time," said Florentine. "I had a talk with him over the telephone this morning."

"I thought Aunt Faith wouldn't have a telephone?"

"Oh, I went out to find one."

"How is the duffer?" I asked irreverently.

Florentine's face grew sad. "He is in very low spirits and he advises me not to get married!"

"The old sinner!"

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"Yes, Mr. Pancoast says that all marriages are foolish, and that this world is a bad world; from his tone I think—I am afraid that Mr. Pancoast is very down in his mind."

"Oh, he'll come along all right," I assured her, for I knew it was "the morning after the night before" for him.

Florentine shook her head sadly and I could see that she did not believe me.

Meanwhile in the reception room the voices had grown firmer.

Uncle Jason had finished his tea and Aunt Faith was pouring him a glass of wine. I knew afterwards it was a very tiny glass and the decanter was tall and slim,—very aristocratic and very old, and the wine was light in weight and delicate in color.

But Uncle Jason eyed it with the eye of a parched man suddenly given a drop of nectar.

"It is wine that was given to my great-grandfather by King George," murmured Aunt Faith as she held the delicate glass by its dainty stem and presented it with a courtesy.

Uncle Jason lifted it to the light. "By gracious!" he exclaimed with a ruddy flush of appreciation, "it's a beauty, that glass; somebody got a bargain, there's inlay."

"That glass was presented to my grandmother by Queen Victoria," fairly bubbled Aunt Faith. "She sent it by a special envoy, the day of my grandmother's crystal wedding."

"Well, here's to grandmother's health!" roared Uncle Jason, tossing down the wine.

UNCLE JASON PLAYS ALADDIN

"My grandmother is dead," said Aunt Faith.

"Not dead!" ejaculated Uncle Jason incredulously. But Aunt Faith was too perfectly delighted to respond.

And now Uncle Jason was saying good-bye to Aunt Faith and she was insisting that she could not possibly accompany him shopping, while he said that she must, and she said she really couldn't.

"But we must buy their wedding present," Uncle Jason insisted. "If those two kids are going to get married, your pretty niece and my scapegrace of a nephew, they've got to have something nice for a wedding gift, that's sure."

Aunt Faith agreed that we ought to have a wedding present, but there were the proprieties to be considered, and when it came to accompanying Uncle Jason to Bond Street without a chaperon, well, she'd like to—but she really couldn't!

Right here I interrupted and managed to get a word alone with her.

"Does—Sir Charles—know?" she asked nervously.

"I've silenced him!" I said quickly.

She gave me a questioning look, but there was no time for explanations.

It wound up by my dragging Uncle Jason away by his coat-tails while Florentine and Aunt Faith stood in the hall, both saying good-bye at once. Uncle Jason insisted that he wasn't going to say good-bye, first because he was superstitious about it, and second because he wasn't going to be gone long enough to make it worth while. He intended to call about three o'clock to report to Aunt Faith the progress he was making with the wedding present. And he would

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bring it up on approval for her to see, and if she didn't like it he'd change it, or he would know the reason why not.

Aunt Faith listened delightedly and nodded her head in approval. Uncle Jason was an Aladdin whose coming could rub all things into brilliancy. We said our adieux and went down the steps, but half way Uncle Jason turned and looked back.

The door was wide open and framed in its archway stood Aunt Faith. She had committed a terrible breach of etiquette for an English lady, for she stood in the doorway to see us off. Uncle Jason turned around and stared at her so long that I had to pluck his sleeve, but I didn't blame him, for Aunt Faith was a picture. Her dark hair, only half streaked with white, was piled on her head in wonderfully dressed puffs and coils and her tall and almost girlishly slim figure was gowned in a lovely grey satin, which did not need the added dignity of Aunt Faith's real lace collar and cuffs.

"By George, she's a thoroughbred, a lady every inch of her," ejaculated Uncle Jason.

I supposed he referred to Florentine and I gave my instantaneous assent.

"I mean Lady Faith," he explained; "she's a remarkable woman."

"Why, you've only known her a little while," I replied slightly jarred.

"I'm sixty-four," retorted my uncle, "and when a man's sixty-four he doesn't have to eat the whole of an egg to judge its character."

We got into the cab and drove some time in silence.

UNCLE JASON PLAYS ALADDIN

A sigh from Uncle Jason recalled me to the present. He sat opposite me with that look on his face which I have grown to associate with some momentous undertaking; but he said nothing.

As we neared Bond Street—for Uncle Jason believes there is no time like now for doing a thing and the wedding present hung on his mind—he said solemnly:

“Roman, your Aunt Maria has been dead four years.”

I made no reply; the tombstone in the family lot at Beverly would corroborate this statement.

After a while the silence was again broken by Uncle Jason. “Roman, don’t you think she looks a little—just a little like your late Aunt Maria; only she’s a little taller and a little slimmer and her hair is a little more fixed up?”

I was still thinking of Florentine and indignation spoke: “She’s a lot younger than Aunt Maria and a thousand times better looking than Aunt Maria ever was.”

A vision of Aunt Maria, short and fat, with her thin grey hair dragged back from her worthy but plain face, flitted through my mind. Like Aunt Maria indeed!

Uncle Jason added no further views and it did not occur to me until next day that he was not referring to Florentine.

“When are you going to Paris?” I asked abruptly for Uncle Jason’s plans seemed suddenly changed.

“I don’t know,” was the sage reply. “Safe prophecy is never dated.”

CHAPTER XXVI

ME OR MY DOUBLE

I LEFT him at the jewelry store, and went over to make my afternoon call on Lady Hensington. Here I found all in turmoil, and I found a Scotland Yard man in charge.

An inventory had been taken of the wedding presents, as they were shipped away, and it was discovered that a chest of silver had been carted bodily off the night before, as well as a gold loving cup.

On learning this, Lady Hensington had sent to Scotland Yard. I found them in close conference in the drawing-room. When he saw me the Scotland Yard man sprang to his feet with a cry:

"Here he is! This is the man who took the silver."

It took some time to quiet him but when I did get the story it was strange enough.

The thief—or the one supposed to be the thief—had so closely resembled me that he was allowed to depart with the articles. The man who had stood at the door, the Scotland Yard man, now talking with Lady Hensington, still swore that it was I. So positive was he in his identification that Lady Hensington wavered, and I thought she looked at me with more suspicious an eye than was agreeable to a man who had graduated at a gentleman's college.

"You surely don't think I stole them?" I asked as she glowered at me. Her reply was non-committal.

ME OR MY DOUBLE

"Where did you go when you left here last night?"

I declined to state, and she continued:

"Because I called up your apartment on the telephone and the reply, in a feminine voice—and the other sounds—made me think, my dear Roman, that you had begun to sow your wild oats here in London."

"Do you mean to intimate that I stole your daughter's gold loving cup and her wedding silver and took them to my flat for the entertainment of a house party?"

Lady Hensington averted her eyes. "But the sounds, the shouts, the wild laughter in your apartment were distinctly to be heard over the 'phone!" she said coldly.

It was useless to argue with Lady Hensington, as she knew what she had heard, and I didn't feel like explaining, but I called the Scotland Yard man out and conversed with him. He was still convinced that I was the thief; and as it had been he who had let the chest of silver go out he was inclined to stick to it. However, after more talk, I partly showed him that he was wrong.

The story was rather interesting to me. The man, my double, had come diffidently to the front door, where the Scotland Yard detective had bidden him a welcome and told him to go in and stand by the wedding presents. He seemed surprised, but did as he was told. In front of the presents he had found another Scotland Yard man who was just as cordial.

Evidently encouraged by their amiability, the thief, my double, had brazenly picked up the big antique turquoise brooch, with some remark about putting it

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away for safe keeping. Later the Scotland Yard man asked him what was to be done with the silver overnight, and he replied that he would begin to remove it at once. So he took the gold loving cup, carried it down and out, and put it in a cab, and came back for the chest of silver.

No suspicions were aroused until about four A. M. when they reported the matter to Lady Hensington with remarks on my singular conduct. Her ladyship had immediately called up my apartment only to hear, over the telephone, echoes of the musical orgy going on within my flat.

They both talked at once, and I pieced the threads together.

"Say nothing for a while," I counseled, "but meet me here again in an hour."

This last to the Scotland Yard man, who, now that he saw I was not the thief, had become sour toward me for defrauding him of his reward.

"And, meanwhile, be as mum as a turtle."

I made it plain to the Scotland Yard man that it would be to his ultimate advantage to be quiet and he left. I went with him to the door.

"I am in a bad hole about this," he admitted, "and I ought to report it at once; if waiting should make it worse——"

"It will be the making of your fame if you can have patience," I assured him, but I did not feel so wholly sure myself.

I thought that Johnny the Crook had taken the silver and the brooch and I knew I had his address—for the highwaywoman had given it to me. But a fear,

ME OR MY DOUBLE

a lurking fear, was still in my heart. I knew that I had left the Crook under the windows of Sir Charles' room at that tempting hour for crooks, the hour of darkness. And I did not know what had happened.

Lady Hensington reluctantly let me go, for she had the feeling that she was losing her chances of getting her possessions.

She held on to me almost to the door.

"The turquoise brooch, that lovely antique, the heirloom of the De Chambrey family," she moaned.

"I cannot answer for the brooch," I said, "but it may be found yet. It may possibly be pawned or sold."

She brightened a little, "It's as big as a trade dollar and a lovely shade of blue all set in a beautiful pale silver filigree setting. Oh, dear!"

"Cheer up," I advised, "and be thankful!"

I don't know just what she had to be thankful for but I felt so joyful myself that nothing more serious had gone that I wanted the whole world to join me in a pæan of thanksgiving.

She promised to be as thankful as she could, and the Scotland Yard man and I left the mansion together. In parting he wrung my hand and thanked me again.

"If you know a rogue or a rascal in London, point him out to me and I'll do him for you," he said confidentially.

I wanted to tell him that I did know a rogue and a rascal and that I was uneasy about him at that moment, and that I would really like to know what he was doing out at the Castle; but it didn't seem a case for the active endeavor of my Scotland Yard friend.

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However, the Hepworth had not been stolen and for this I was thankful. I mentally conveyed my apologies to Sir Charles for having suspected him of taking it in that moment when, by the side of Lady Hensington, he had fuddled the wrappings of his hand.

After I left him I signaled that ready companion of every man in London, a cabby, and giving him a direction I settled back to think; there was little more to be done except to drop a line to Lady Hensington, telling her that I was about to be married. And to keep her from bothering me about her brooch I would tell her that I would start at once for the Continent on my wedding tour. Dear lady! how she would gasp!

Alighting at Trafalgar Square, I ran plump into Uncle Jason. He was bustling along with a box in his arms, around which he could scarcely reach.

"Hello!" I exclaimed, "what in the world!"

"Flowers!" he cried, joyfully. "The biggest in London. I couldn't get American Beauties, but these will do. She said she liked pansies—but I think she ought to have roses, and the only way to get 'em to her without smashing 'em is to carry 'em."

"Do you think she wants red roses?" I asked a little doubtfully, for I had just deposited a rush order for orange blossoms.

"Sure!" said Uncle Jason, proudly, "and I'm going to tell her how to wear them."

I stared at him, for I could not avoid the impression that my Uncle Jason was rather overreaching himself in the matter of floral offerings, and was intruding into what should be my province.

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"Red roses are inappropriate," I remarked.

"Don't you be so young, my boy," he returned patronizingly, "and remember your Uncle Jason wasn't born yesterday. I've got a bunch all tied with ribbon for her hair—the lady clerk fixed it for me—and another to carry in her hand, and a beautiful bouquet for her corset."

"You mean her corsage!" I suggested, endeavoring to be pleasant. "But I want to hint to you that this is an affair that is strictly mine, and if Florentine wants flowers for her corsage——"

"Florentine! Who said anything about Florentine?"

"Why, aren't those roses for her?"

"No, you damn fool!" And with a shake of impatience that set the rose petals flying, Uncle Jason left me standing in the middle of the sidewalk where I turned to stare at him and wonder if he had gone mad. While I looked I saw him step nimbly into a tailor shop on Regent Street.

I ran across him once more; it was on Oxford Street, and when he saw me he treated me to a wise wink:

"I found a bargain this time, my boy," said he. "It's a beautiful piece of jewelry; bought it of a woman in the street for a song; I'll tell you all about it some time. She'll be delighted with it; it's a big blue turquoise set in silver, and it was a bargain!"

Then he linked his arm in mine and we walked up the Strand to the Savoy, where we stopped for what Uncle Jason called a "smile." While we smiled, he told me some gossip about the Hadley family which I had not heard before. In that short space of time,

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my Uncle Jason had been introduced into the best Club in London and had hobnobbed at luncheon with men whose names were household words to me, but whom personally I had never even aspired to meet.

"You've met more celebrities in one day than most men meet in one lifetime," I declared, as he poured out the story of the morning to me. But he wanted to tell me about the Hadleys and about Sir Charles in particular.

CHAPTER XXVII

THE ROOM WITH THE DOUBLE WALL

IT appeared from what Uncle Jason had heard, that that nobleman's affairs were much more deeply involved than was generally supposed. He had borrowed heavily, invested badly, and unless some good piece of fortune came his way, he was pretty nearly face to face with ruin.

"So that is why he was so keen after Florentine," I remarked.

Uncle Jason nodded as he went on to tell me more of the family affairs, which were, from his narrative, in desperate shape. For one thing, Aunt Faith's elegant little town house was heavily mortgaged—the poor lady had entrusted her last dollar to Sir Charles—and for another, there was a lien on nearly every scrap of everything owned by any of the Hadleys.

"They won't have enough left to wind around their little fingers unless somebody jumps in and saves their lives," was Uncle Jason's decision.

"Are you going to be the life-saver?" I asked.

Uncle Jason's reply was a chuckle. "A change of farms does an old horse good," he declared, as he sat and fingered his glass reflectively.

"Roman, your Aunt Maria has been dead four years, and now your Cousin Irene is going to Constantinople to teach the devout Turks how to become side-stepping Christians. I knew a Turk once; he

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lived in Boston; sold rugs. The Koran was on his mind as steady as the motor was on mine. He spent his Sundays on his stomach; I spent mine on my back with a monkey wrench in my hand. He used to get down on his knees and chin a spot in his prayer rug three times a day. One day he told me that he had been in Boston a whole year and hadn't seen a Christian yet. You couldn't live in Constantinople a whole year and not see a Mohammedan. But Irene is like her mother; when she wants to do a thing she up and does it—for twenty years your Aunt Maria sent my old pajamas to Borneo. And, now, Irene is going to leave me, to tell the Turks how to be religious."

"Yes, Uncle Jason."

I was thinking of Aunt Maria, who never wore her best dress until it was out of style and who kept the covers on the parlor furniture all the year around; when Uncle Jason smoked she followed him with an ash tray. Long before she died Aunt Maria planted a box of grave moss because it would be so much cheaper than buying it of a florist; the weeping willow in the family lot she raised from a shrub and watered with a tomato can.

My uncle took a long quaff, set down his glass and sighed deeply; sighed so heavily that his ruddy face became seamed with long lugubrious wrinkles. He looked like a chubby baby getting ready to cry.

"Roman, it's a lonesome life. I've got a snug little house in Beverly, with a stable, a garage, a lake and a windmill!"

"Finest country seat in New England," I exclaimed.

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"And I've got a few dollars tucked away for a rainy day."

"An umbrella of at least a million," I observed.

Uncle Jason smiled a gratified smile.

"I was only thinking, Roman——" From afar there came the subdued strains of a Hungarian band; Uncle Jason began to beat time with his finger.

"Wedding bells listen good to me," he said.

The Hungarian band hummed along and under its encouraging influence Uncle Jason leaned across the table and tapped my hand.

"That was a mighty pretty little gilt wine glass she gave me with that drop of pink water in it. By George, I'd like to get a dozen just like it for her! Heh! My boy, do you want to come out with me and look for a glass store?"

Uncle Jason's smile was that of a plump cherub gazing into a pink glass alley.

I shook my head.

"Your Aunt Maria always drank out of jelly tumblers to save the cut glass. Now I was thinking——"

"Well, think away! But don't spend too much. Some men are Marathons at running into debt when they get to London."

Uncle Jason tapped his forehead and his vest pocket alternately.

"I'll see you later; don't forget the hour for the ceremony," I called back, "I've got troubles of my own!"

There's many a true word spoken in jest as people remark when they do not know that they are speaking seriously.

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Hardly had I left Uncle Jason when I had an encounter which I was destined to remember long. Looking backward I can say that, brief though it was, it left its lasting impression upon my fortunes. At the time it surprised as much as it alarmed me.

As I stood upon the curb looking for a cab, I felt my arm suddenly grasped by a woman's bare hand.

I looked down; there stood by my side a person in an auto coat with a veil tied over her hat, but it was pulled down so that it shaded her face pretty closely.

"My word!" she exclaimed, distinctly but very low, "what are you doing here? Don't you know they're out looking for you?"

Quick as a flash, for I am not always absent-minded, I pulled my own hat down and turned my head away.

"I don't see anyone," I muttered.

"My eye, but you're careless!"

I glanced cautiously at her. Yes, it was my highwaywoman of the night before. I could not be mistaken; same red hair and hard, high colored cheeks that looked redder and harder in the cruel daylight.

"I'm going right home," I assured her.

"Hurry as fast as ever you can; they'll be coming from the Castle. Get over to the rooms quick; Bud has gone out, but you've got a skeleton key."

"Are you sure the rooms are safe?" I whispered, shrinking back a little toward the shadow of the nearest building.

"A damn sight safer than the street!" was the fierce ejaculation. "My word, but you do take chances! Go

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over; let yourself in softly, and if they come you can slip into the floor."

I looked at her; the veil was quite over her face now, so her vision was dim, and my own features were concealed by my hat. I had also turned up my coat collar. She had mistaken me again for Johnny the Crook and I was hot on the trail.

"I don't think I can manage the floor alone," I said, with a timid shudder that alarmed her.

"Yes you can! And you don't want to go now and show the white feather; they string up a man quicker here than they do in Australia, and you ain't going to lose your nerve. Press down on the boards under the window and they'll lift at t'other end. There's a false bottom to the floor; you can crawl under——"

She stopped; an eager move of mine may have scared her.

"Didn't Bud tell you?" she questioned sharply.

I shook my head.

"He said he did."

She stepped uneasily and craned her neck.

I looked around with an apprehension that was not simulated; suppose Bud should see us or Johnny himself if he were so foolish as to come out into the open.

"You step on one end of the board and the other end flies up. Two boards at once. Under you drop, and you work yourself along until you come to the partition between the two rooms; there you'll find a secret chamber; it isn't big enough for more than one person at a time, but there's a cot in it and you can lay low. If they come to look for you there's

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a peep hole so you can see 'em. If they scent you there's a box cupboard at the end of the double wall."

"Are they out for me?" I asked.

"Hush," she said, "you bet they are; it don't take 'em long; they've been searching the Castle woods these hours. They found him sooner——"

"Tell me the worst," I begged with chattering teeth.

"You get home quick," she advised. "Bud's got the diamond, but when he gets back he'll put it in the false floor. It'll be moons before you dare to have it cut up, but when you do, it's good loot for all of us."

I muttered a gibbering assent.

"Is—is he—dead?"

"You're losing your nerve! My eye!" she exclaimed, as her gaze fell on somebody across the street. "My word!"

I would have given a fortune to know the rest—to hear *who* was dead—but I dared not stop.

I did not wait to hear more; I darted into the crowd, caught a hansom and within two minutes was entering the Savoy from the embankment; my destination was the telephone booth.

But with what feelings did I now proceed! Johnny, the Crook, was in London. The Castle grounds were being ineffectually beaten for him—if the word of the woman was to be believed—and he was in possession of a diamond, so large in size and of such conspicuous beauty, that it would have to be cut up before it could be sold!

Where had Johnny, the Crook, obtained the diamond—and why were they searching the woods for him? Had anything happened to Sir Charles?

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I called up Lady Hensington and at her end of the wire I was given such a flood of words that I could understand nothing. The main thing appeared that I was needed at once. Lady Hensington, herself, got to the 'phone and hysterically implored me to hurry.

There was trouble at Lady Hensington's house; and it was trouble which I could not dodge. From her few coherent sentences I knew that I must expect the worst.

I jumped back into the cab and was at her door while my senses were still whirling. I was shown—pushed is a more accurate description—into her drawing-room and the hall doors were rolled shut behind me.

Immediately I found myself in the presence of six persons, among them Lady Hensington; and as I advanced to speak to her, she hurriedly introduced me to three men from Scotland Yard. They were more or less professional in aspect; but the other two who bore the appearance of brokers were introduced as diamond experts.

"Speak, somebody!" implored Lady Hensington. "This is my lawyer," indicating me, "and he will act for me."

It was no time for snobbishness, as she and all assembled saw. She peeled off her manner as one peels off a burdensome garment, and now she was her impulsive self.

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE MISSING HEPWORTH

NOT all speaking at once, but quite intelligently, for they were men of the world, they told the story. I gathered it thus:

Lady Hensington had that morning become alarmed at the theft of the brooch and had decided to place the Hepworth diamond in safe keeping. Calling up her jeweler she had asked him to send two men to get the gem. The messengers had come and Lady Hensington had handed over the blue velvet box to them.

According to custom, and as a safeguard as well as a formality, the men asked to see the diamond. Lady Hensington herself opened the box; the men stared at it, then they exchanged glances with each other and one of them lifted the stone from its place.

They fingered the diamond, held it up to the light and handed it back to Lady Hensington. Much surprised she had asked the meaning of the curious looks.

"The stone is mock," declared one of the men.

"A good imitation, but mere paste," added the other. "It is not worth the box in which it lies."

Lady Hensington, faint and incredulous, but fearing the worst, called up the jeweler. The men were experts, and nothing could be done. If they had said

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the Hepworth was pasté, it was nothing else; moreover they knew the Hepworth well. When it was re-cut, five years before, the work had been done in their laboratory. It was impossible to doubt their word or question their judgment.

After Lady Hensington had come out of her swoon, Scotland Yard was called up, and as the detectives came, I arrived also.

"Oh!" groaned Lady Hensington, white as death, "what shall I do?"

I was to the surprise of everyone and the exasperation of Lady Hensington, the coolest of them all.

"When did you last have it from its box?" I asked, as we all bent forward to listen.

"It has not been out of the box since the day I purchased it, nearly a month ago; it has been under lock and key until last night. Then I had it put in this blue velvet box with the wedding presents."

"Yes," I prompted, "and last night?"

"It was not touched except once, and that was when I lifted it from the table to show it to Sir Charles Hadley. The box slipped from my hand, but Sir Charles picked it up and replaced it before my very eyes."

"I saw it," I observed.

"Later I sent him back to be sure that it was safely laid in its case."

"And after that?"

Lady Hensington remembered nothing special except that she herself had locked it up before the guests departed.

"Ah!" I breathed, and we took the opportunity of

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exchanging glances all around; but our communications were mystic and not clear cut.

"So, Sir Charles Hadley was the last person to handle this diamond?" questioned one of the men.

Lady Hensington opened her lips to speak, but closed them again. The detectives exchanged glances and I could see that suspicion had fallen on Sir Charles.

Yet, wretch though he was, he was Florentine's cousin, and I must, in honor, protect him as far as I could without sacrificing myself.

"There's nothing more to be said now," I remarked unconsciously assuming the direction of the matter, "and Lady Hensington is too exhausted to talk."

I dismissed them all. But as they were going, my Scotland Yard friend of an hour before beckoned to me.

"It's all up," he said shortly, "they've fired me—or they will when I get back."

"Don't be so sure," I returned. "But get out your note book and listen."

He produced a book; as I spoke he made cabalistic signs.

"Not so fast," I cautioned him. "I don't know who took that diamond, and if I did I wouldn't tell. But I know pretty nearly where it is."

I had decided that—though it might complicate matters and involve me in an embarrassing discussion—I would do what I could to recover the diamond. I owed this much to myself.

He looked up doubtfully.

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"It is at that address," I said, handing him the slip of paper which the henna tinted lady had given me the night before in the road. "And if it isn't there you can get it by watching the place."

He took the paper: "Crookedest location in London!" was his remark.

"Well!" I observed, "the diamond isn't far from there. It has become the property of Johnny, the Australian Crook, and he's living at that number."

"Johnny, the Australian Crook," exclaimed the Scotland Yard man, jumping a foot in the air, "why, there's a big reward out for him!"

I shrugged my shoulders as he told me how Johnny the Crook had escaped from Sydney by some unknown route, and how the police of every port were on the lookout for him.

"This will be a big feather in my cap," he cried, shaking my hand, "if it comes out well."

"Get back the diamond for Lady Hensington and you may wear the feather proudly," I declared.

"Of course you know that he is the one who came to the wedding as my double this morning about four—as the guests were leaving—and in the confusion took the gold cup, the brooch and the silver plate."

"I'll get 'em all!" he swore.

Then, for I knew I must trust him wholly, I told him about the double floor, the secret chamber hidden in the false partitions and the little box cupboard beyond. While I described it, he scribbled it madly.

"There's a peep hole in the wall; remember that he can see you and dodge. There's a way, I believe, of sliding through the inner wall, down three stories to

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the cellar. You can wager they wouldn't forget to provide a way of escape."

"That's a new one on me," he smiled.

"Now don't let your steps get cold," I cautioned him, "and work pretty carefully. Say 'Singapore' at the door—if you need a password."

I wasn't sure he heard the last, for he darted away as though he were in the game of hare and hounds.

I returned to Lady Hensington's drawing-room after seeing my friend of Scotland Yard disappear, and here I found grief indeed, for, as she hysterically admitted, she had put a fortune in the great diamond, and now to lose it meant certain trouble. The de Chambrays would demand the money in cash and Lady Hensington could not produce it. She had intended all the time to sell the diamond.

It was to be shown at the reception to set all London gaping, and then it was to go to Italy. It would be as good as an invitation to Court to display it in Naples. After the merry round of the social season it had been decided to put it in a safe deposit vault—which was only another way of admitting that it would be sold. Lady Hensington thought she could eat her cake and have it.

"Of course it was taken while you were in charge," she accused, "and no one could have touched it if you had been watching as you ought to have watched."

I was not ready to admit this and I told her Ladyship so, adding a few other facts, taking care, however, to shield Sir Charles, for, after all, he was Florentine's cousin. But I did manage to cast a doubt in her mind as to when the robbery and substi-

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tution had actually occurred. Manlike, having made my point, I was willing to retrieve.

Lady Hensington, who had become quite meek, now asked my advice. She did not say it in so many words—for she was too well bred to hint—but since the diamond had been stolen during the evening, it did seem hard that the loss should fall entirely on her. The words she did utter with pointed meaning were these:

“You are single, Roman, and you have more than you want!”

Following this, she very tactfully suggested that a loan, to be paid back in the future,—say if a certain London investment turned out well—would be acceptable. She had never asked for a loan before and this was such a prodigious one; yet what was she to do?

But to this I would not listen. I had no intention of burdening her with a debt that she could never pay, and I told her so, adding a few cold crumbs of comfort.

Meanwhile, I made up my mind what I would do. My own sense of responsibility told me that I was in a way to blame for the loss of the gem, even though Sir Charles had taken it in Lady Hensington's presence and had substituted a piece of paste, as I firmly believed. And I must restore it to her or its equivalent.

Going to her telephone, which happened to be a boxed one in the hall, I made certain immediate appointments, the import of which I did not mention to Lady Hensington; next I bade her good-bye civilly, but I left her in uncertainty as to what course I intended to pursue.

THE STAIRWAY ON THE WALL

On the 'phone I had got the office of the best known diamond broker in London, and as shops do not close when a big sale is being negotiated, I had no difficulty in persuading him to leave up his shades until I could drive to his place.

It is not every day that a great diamond is sold ; and, when it is known that an American is coming to make the purchase, the interest runs high.

Morally, I might be culpable for the theft of the jewel and I resolved to replace it.

CHAPTER XXIX

I BUY THE KOHINA

I FOUND Breistein, the famous broker, to be a little man, sharp, shrewd and anxious. Mysterious dealings in the diamond world had made him like a ferret in shaking up trouble, and he would not talk to me until he had conversed with Morgan, Harges over the wire. When he returned his manner had changed from indifference to confidence and he talked freely and with the fluency of one who understands his trade.

He offered me a cigar wrapped in gold foil.

I told him the object of my visit: that I wished to know if there was a diamond to be had in London now, a diamond as big as the Hepworth.

Yes, there was the Soudan. It was bigger, but not as brilliant, and so less valuable.

It would not do!

He ruminated a minute, going to the 'phone again. The Cecil had been placed with a broker and it was to be disposed of; it was a pear shaped diamond of prodigious size; in value it compared with the Regent and the Sancy, but it was pear shaped and did not resemble the Hepworth. This made it out of the question.

There was also the Kitchener, which was over a hundred carats—not so large as the others—but very white. The Cape Town, a blue diamond, could be

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bought in Paris, if the buyer would assume the obligation of a mortgage; and a Liverpool broker had telegraphed that day that the Rhodes, a diamond well known for its pinkish caste, had been put with him for immediate disposition; and that was all.

None would do. I questioned him closely. He could think of no others. Stay!

He ran to the 'phone.

"I thought they'd be anxious to sell it," he observed as he returned, "they've been going to put it on the market, but dreaded the publicity until recently."

"Why are they willing to let it go now?" I asked.

He laughed. "Oh, they've had a paste diamond made of one hundred and fifty carats. It is so real that a few feet away it would deceive anyone except an expert, so they can dispense with the real diamond without fear of family exposure."

Then he told me the story. An English prince of royal blood had lost his all at gambling. To avert a scandal his mother had obtained possession of her share of the family gems—a single crown jewel—and had given it to the princeling to sell.

"It's the famous Kohina," he whispered, afraid that even the walls would hear. "First cousin to the Kohinoor and the twin stone of the Hepworth."

"Its price?" I asked feebly.

The reply staggered me!

Lady Hensington had indeed put her fortune in the Hepworth diamond if she had paid an equivalent sum.

"I'll take it," I said with a suddenness that ought to have bewildered him, "and you can deliver it to me in half an hour at the Carleton."

I BUY THE KOHINA

He stopped and thought.

"I can do it," he decided. "But remember that it's half an hour until the whole hour is up—and wait."

"Trash!" I retorted, "the jewel isn't five minutes off, if you take an electric; in ten minutes you can have it at the Carleton, and this leaves fifteen for accidents and delays."

He looked at me with admiration. It was not his first experience in making a quick deal with Americans, but I had him going and I could see that the ferret in him was awake and working.

"I'll be there in the smoking-room at the right; but don't let any one see me pass it to you; and remember when you're buying a gem of royalty that you're to keep still about it forever. Diamonds are the play of young princes just as racing is the sport of kings."

I promised all things and went to the Carleton at the right time. Half an hour later he placed in my hand the precious Kohina gem.

"It is a stone that has cost nine lives," he said, laughing his quick, nervous laugh, "and it's been an engagement present more times than there are English kings in the royal sepulcher. It's said to bring luck in love, if not at the tables."

I handed him an envelope which meant something at the English bankers and put the diamond in my pocket. It bulged out like a plum.

I had spent a fortune, the fortune which Florentine and I might need, but I knew that the disposal of money in this way could not have anything but her approval.

I resolved that I would tell her. But I decided to

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say nothing about the Scotland Yard man. In my opinion it was very doubtful if he succeeded in getting back the Hepworth.

When I went back to Aunt Faith's house—which I did as soon as possible—I was shown into the drawing-room. There was a little more formality in my reception than I had grown to expect, and when Florentine kept me waiting for ten minutes my wonder grew.

As she entered the room I was still more surprised, for she greeted me with a coolness that was most foreign to her; a frigidity that bordered on hauteur.

Her sudden coldness had driven the warm impulsive explanation that was on my lips completely out of my heart.

"Why, what—what is it?" I asked.

Florentine made no reply, but the haughty look changed to one of obstinacy; her face, for the first time since I had known her, wore an expression which I did not understand. She chilled my marrow.

"What is the matter, Florentine, have I offended you?"

Her reply staggered me. "Your Cousin Irene is here. She came at noon. Aunt Faith invited her to remain; she sent for her baggage."

"Ah!" I observed, with my heart sinking. It wasn't a wise observation, but it covered the situation, and it was the best I had on hand.

"Her luggage arrived," continued Florentine, "and I have been helping her unpack her boxes."

"You—don't—say—so!" I exclaimed, simulating a glee I did not feel.

I BUY THE KOHINA

I knew there were breakers ahead and that they were more fatal to happiness than deep sea waves.

Florentine tossed, actually tossed, her trim little silver head. "I am helping her unpack her—her lingerie!"

Now, Cousin Irene believes in wearing home-made underwear; she buys unbleached muslin and makes it up herself; it is more sensible and more durable; I have often heard her recommend unbleached muslin to her sewing class. So I received this news without elation.

"There's something I've been going to explain—Florentine."

"And she isn't fond of violet! Still, since the matter has gone so far, and as we are to separate immediately after the ceremony, I don't suppose it need matter."

"Oh, Florentine!" I cried, throwing a world of pleading in my voice, "I don't ask you to believe me now, but some day you will—you must."

But Florentine was cool. "If you will excuse me, Mr. Elliott, I will go back and finish helping your cousin with her trunk. I may discover some of the violet belongings which we saw in your apartment this morning—the heavily scented violet lingerie with which your rooms were so bountifully supplied."

CHAPTER XXX

SHALL IT BE ORANGE BLOSSOMS

SHE rose and I might have considered myself dismissed but I was determined not to let a thing like violet lingerie come between us.

"Florentine," I said, "would you believe me if—if I should tell you the truth?"

"You might experiment," she rejoined coldly.

"I've been interviewing your Uncle Jason," she added.

Again I uttered the unwise "Ah!"

"Yes, and he tells me that you are *not poor*; he says your grandfather willed you one fortune, and that your father left you another and that your mother is very rich and that you are worth a million pounds *at least* in your own right."

"That is five times what it would be in American money," I answered calmly.

"And that isn't all. He says you have a yacht, a motor and an airship!"

"Riches fly!" I observed, "and I want you to know, Florentine—I want you to believe——"

She looked so sulky that she frightened me. She couldn't stand for my wealth.

Here was a good chance to break the news to her, and it would be the truth.

"Florentine," I solemnly declared, "I have something serious to tell you."

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My long visage alarmed her and the haughty tilt of her head was lowered to one of concern. She smiled and I could see the cold look melt as dew before the sun.

"Let me know the worst; I can bear it," she said, and I saw that the heroine in her was aroused. Woman is at her best when bearing a load; like the caryatid that supports the great entablature of the Acropolis of Athens, she can hold up her burden and smile. Take away the burden and she goes down.

Florentine took a step toward me, her face full of solicitude.

"You must tell me," she repeated, "even though I have—may have—lost my regard for you!"

She tried to say it stiffly but failed.

And I did tell her; not all, but enough. I told her that Lady Hensington had lost a diamond—no! not by my absence last night but through another source. And that, as there was some discussion about it, I felt in-honor bound, both to my law firm at home and to Lady Hensington, to replace it.

"And it has taken a great deal of money, perhaps your fortune," she cried, with vibrating voice.

It had taken part, but it hadn't taken all, and I assured her that—if she didn't care for the extras—we could still pull along.

"We can economize," she said, laughing merrily in a way that proved she was her own sweet self again.

Yes, we could economize! I once asked a busted millionaire how he would begin to retrench. He said he had put the same question to his wife the night before. She said car fares; he said waistcoats.

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I thought it all over now and I wondered how far one could trolley on the price of the Kohina; how many times would a man have to lap his coat over his stomach before he had saved the price of the Kohina in waistcoats!

But if Florentine could not have the Kohina she could see it. I drew it from my pocket and unclasped the leather case. It lay in its setting of black satin, a thing of dancing incandescents. It was as big as a hickory.

I told Florentine she might take it in her hand. To my surprise she shook her head and turned away.

"I don't fancy diamonds very much," she remarked carelessly.

"Don't tell Uncle Jason that after he shopped all the afternoon for your matched collar."

Her expression softened and then she looked straight at me and told a fib.

"I don't like such big, bright diamonds!"

It was a heavenly falsehood; one of the kind that woman has told since the world began; a falsehood built of the bright fabric of which angels' wings are formed; a lie that makes for love.

There was a step outside.

Aunt Faith appeared at the door and I had to speak to her. A minute later I had a chance to whisper to Florentine:

"Shall it be orange blossoms?"

She hesitated, and the little obstinate look came back into her face; her small nose lifted a trifle. She couldn't forget it.

"Anything but violets," she observed with a touch

SHALL IT BE ORANGE BLOSSOMS

of the frappé with which violets will always be associated with her. "I particularly hate violets."

Which shows that a woman can forgive a man his bad times, but never his good ones.

There was no time for another word for the orange blossoms had arrived—I had ordered them as a surprise—a great, snowy, fragrant mass, all packed in flowering myrtle; and while Florentine hung over them with glistening eyes, Irene came bustling in and said that I must go.

I protested, but Irene was firm. There was much to do. The orange blossoms must go in water and she had promised Aunt Faith to help dress the drawing-room and I would be terribly *de trop* at the best.

Florentine looked rebellious and I half thought she was going to beg Irene to let me stay, for Irene with a New England woman's mania for taking charge had already become mistress of ceremonies; but Irene was more than obdurate. So I found my hat and slipped away.

At the door Aunt Faith intercepted me and invited me into her little reception-room across the hall. The dear lady had, really, no excuse for stopping me, but she wanted to explain, or apologize, for the lack of formality, which lack was very unusual in an English household, but I would understand that circumstances could alter cases; and circumstances in this case had been so very extraordinary, not to say peculiar, that—well, the hurried and informal wedding could not be helped!

I promised to overlook all and to pardon all. And then she told me of an almost similar instance in the

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family of the Duke of Westminster, a thousand years ago, before the Duke had been elevated to the peerage. It wasn't exactly similar but it served as a precedent.

I kindly agreed to take it into consideration before forming judgment.

And then Aunt Faith wanted to talk about Uncle Jason, how handsome he was, how hearty in manner, just like the Prince of Wales, and so clever!

I agreed to everything, but Aunt Faith still wanted to discuss him.

"And of noble lineage, too!" she exclaimed.

Noble lineage! I had known my Uncle Jason all my life, but this was the first I had ever heard of his noble lineage.

"Why, his ancestor commanded that vast ship, the great *Mayflower*; and another noble ancestor fought with General La Fayette in the great war of the Revolution. He could have been a King no doubt if he would have accepted the title; his name was Captain John Smith, he was your uncle's uncle."

"Uncle Jason's uncle a king!" I ejaculated.

"Certainly," she answered, "and he should be in Westminster Abbey for his courage and his—his daring. Of course," added Aunt Faith, "it is to be regretted that the Colonies ever uprose against England, but since they did——"

"Better not mention that to Uncle Jason," I suggested.

"I did mention it to him and he said—just what I knew he would say—that he wasn't alive then."

"Indeed, no," I agreed.

SHALL IT BE ORANGE BLOSSOMS

"If he had been," declared Aunt Faith, conclusively, "there would have been no war, for the Colonists would have made your Uncle Jason a king, and he would have come over and sat on the throne with King James and——"

"Here's Uncle Jason now!" I cried, interrupting Aunt Faith just in time—for her history was dazzling, "and you can tell him yourself!"

But she fled like a frightened girl. I afterwards learned from Florentine that Aunt Faith had run—actually dashed—upstairs to have her puffs pinned on and her lace neckpiece adjusted.

I went out and stopped Uncle Jason, who handed his box of red roses reluctantly to Irene, for he wanted to present them himself, and, since we were not wanted, I suggested that we go out for a stroll. While we walked, I explained to him, as requested by Aunt Faith, that such informal weddings were most unusual in the English aristocracy.

"Bosh!" was his reply. "Why, Lord Saxe told me this morning that the brother of the Earl of Holme had run away with the sister of the Duke of Weimer, and that the Countess Elizabeth of Saxe eloped with the Marquis of Lorne-Schlesburg after only two hours' acquaintance. Don't try to show your Uncle Jason, my boy."

When we turned to retrace our steps to the house, Uncle Jason called a hansom. "There's some class about your uncle when he's in London," he remarked, stepping in. And then, only then, did I see his clothes; he had garbed himself anew in latest London fashion. A light topcoat of jaunty cut hung open and

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I could discern a dress suit of newest design. I looked my surprise.

"Braid down the trouser legs," he observed, as the hansom flew shut on us. Then to the cabby, he called, "Go slow!"

My uncle's face had assumed the serious expression which means that he has something of note to say.

"Roman," he said, "I've got something to tell you and I suppose I had better say it now."

I had heard enough and was quite ready to dispense with further revelations; for I was within a few minutes of my marriage to the finest girl in the world; and it was pleasanter to look ahead than to be jarred by current realities.

"No time like the present," I quoted.

"Well," he replied, "it's serious business and you better be posted on it before Florry and—and the ladies—hear about it."

CHAPTER XXXI

A POINT OF ETHICS

REACHING into his pocket Uncle Jason pulled out a big white sheet of paper. "It's a bulletin," he said.

And while I looked at it wonderingly, he told me how he had passed the *Times* office and had seen a bulletin that interested him. Going inside he had given the bill poster a guinea for the bulletin and had brought it away entire. There it was, a big white paper sheet, nearly six feet square, just as the bill poster had torn it out of its frame.

"They'd have had an extra out in five minutes in my country," he remarked, as he smoothed out the paper and tried to get it far enough away for me to read it.

Spelling the great letters out, as rapidly as I could; this is what I saw:

DEATH OF SIR CHARLES HADLEY.
FOUND MURDERED IN HIS ROOM IN
WENTSTONE CASTLE.

ROBBERY THE MOTIVE.

MURDERER ESCAPES.

BIG DIAMOND RECENTLY ACQUIRED BY
SIR CHARLES MISSING.

GREAT DROP IN SEPOYS FOLLOWING A
WEEK OF DULLNESS.

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SIR CHARLES HADLEY'S MINES FORCED
INTO BANKRUPTCY.

JOHNNY THE AUSTRALIAN CROOK AT
LARGE; ESCAPES FROM THE ROOMS
OF BUD OF BATTERSEA; HEAVY RECOVERY
OF LOOT.

CLEWS IMPLICATE A RICH AMERICAN IN
THE MURDER OF SIR CHARLES HADLEY
AT WENTSTONE LAST NIGHT.

My eye followed the bulletin again. Sir Charles murdered; my suspicions had come true! How much had I been to blame and could I have prevented the tragedy? The stairway on the wall had been too great a temptation for the crook. But it was the fault of Sir Charles after all; the gleam of a diamond has been responsible for more than one hanging. And the rich American toward whom the finger of suspicion pointed! I did not dare to think!

And Johnny the Australian; he had got away. But they had recovered the loot, though not the Hepworth or it would have been mentioned. It was too glorious a thing to have its light hid under a bushel.

"I thought you better know it right away," said Uncle Jason. "That fellow was killed just in time; he'd have been arrested by to-morrow."

"Do you mean Sir Charles?"

For I had read the big lettered bulletin without taking it in. "Is he—dead?"

"Surely—read the top line!"

"Great Scott!" I exclaimed with sudden realization,

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"they will know it at Aunt Faith's. When did it occur?"

"Bulletin just posted. Don't worry about it, my boy, they haven't got a telephone and from what Faith—I mean Lady Faith—tells me, it will take a day before the news gets to her. They move pretty slow."

I sank back in the cab in a blue revery and Uncle Jason, himself, more upset than he would have admitted, let me think.

There are minds that work deliberately and it was some minutes before the scene lay spread before me; there was Sir Charles who went out to the Castle with the big diamond in his possession the night before, and out in the open road, before all those men, he had displayed it. I had seen him flash it openly and brag about it. Lurking in the bushes was Johnny, the Australian Crook! How plain it all appeared to me now. And Johnny the Crook had seen the diamond; how could he help seeing it when Sir Charles held it up, and he had waited. Then there came the time when the Castle lay asleep, and Johnny, tempted by the ladder on the wall, had gone up and done his night's work.

I read the bulletin again: "Clews implicate a rich American in the murder of Sir Charles."

It was all so clear to me now, but I did not speak it aloud to Uncle Jason. It was evident that he had not connected me with the American who had been mentioned in the bulletin. But the line was ominous.

"I suppose we ought to tell them," I objected.

But to this Uncle Jason would not listen. He didn't want Florentine's wedding spoiled and Sir

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Charles was an old wretch anyway, who didn't deserve to live; certainly nobody would mourn for him. So why spoil the nuptials?

At last I agreed, though a little reluctantly, to think it over, and Uncle Jason destroyed the bulletin.

"I wonder who killed him?" he pondered.

I sat and reflected; it was plain to me that I could not tell my Uncle all the circumstances attending our courtship; yet it grew clearer that I must not marry Florentine without letting her know of her cousin's demise. It was one of those moments in life when ethics darken happiness.

She had first considered marrying me solely to escape falling into the hands of her cousin.

"What's the trouble?" pumped out Uncle Jason as my cloudy countenance dimmed the cab.

I shook my head. "It may make a difference with Florentine," I answered.

"Don't be a fool, my boy," he advised; "don't be a fool; though I must say that you do come by it honestly. Your father wouldn't propose for three years until he got the consent of all the members of your mother's family and then your mother put off the wedding a year because your father's second cousin objected to her. No wonder you're a damn fool, Roman."

I sat silent, neither affirming nor denying; yet there was planted in my mind the firm conviction that to marry Florentine without letting her know that the one she married me to escape was gone, would be an act to freeze the ethics of an atheist.

Of course, there was, as a balancer, her own family

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trouble of which we had agreed not to speak—but the man who buys a woman through her misfortunes is not a man in love.

"Will you kindly tell me," said my Uncle, lowering at me from his side of the cab, "what difference the death of that old reprobate could make to Florentine? She isn't going to be sorry enough to cry; and if she wants to wear mourning for him she can put a black band around her arm for thirty days."

Uncle Jason gave a Yankee chuckle; he couldn't or wouldn't understand.

My only reply was a look duller than before; a chill had fallen upon my spirits; a something which I dared not to utter aloud.

Uncle Jason's big, comfortable hand was laid on my knee.

"What's the matter, my boy?" he queried, for it would have taken no artificial lens to discover the fact that I was wretched.

"Tell it to your old uncle!"

"Nothing," I answered.

"Well, let it be nothing," he advised, "and cheer up—the best is yet to come."

"I know, Uncle Jason," I replied, turning to him, just as I used to when I was a boy and wanted him to do something for me, for I felt helpless as a child at this instant. "I know, Uncle Jason, but——"

"It's about that Sir Charles," he said, sobering his voice, "and you think you ought to tell her because she——"

"That's it exactly; because she would never have been—or might never have been engaged to me——"

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except that she was afraid of him and wanted to escape from him."

Uncle Jason listened to argument; then he coughed and flourished his handkerchief; he always was soft-hearted.

"You're right, Roman; you're right. And then, again, maybe you're wrong!"

"I don't understand, Uncle Jason."

I spoke like a schoolboy. I was suddenly very meek and humble; struck silly, so to speak, by the hand of fate. The reading of that bulletin had changed the whole horizon for me. Was I doing right to marry Florentine under the circumstances, or was I taking advantage of her? Would she have—would it have been the same between her and me—if there had been no will, no money, no Sir Charles? And was she marrying me for love, or was it to escape her much dreaded cousin? I faltered it out after a fashion—with reservations.

Uncle Jason was, for once, wordless. One broad, kindly hand rested upon my shoulder, but my uncle's voice faltered; he understood my feelings and he felt for me.

"I suppose," he coughed, "I know you'd better make a clean breast of it; not that it'll make any difference to the girl!"

"I don't know," I admitted.

And then, though confessions were not in my legal curriculum, I opened my lips and related more. I told him about Lady Hensington and her trust betrayed; how she had asked me to watch the Hepworth and the other wedding presents and how I had slipped

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away—left them—and of the awful fact that the wonderful Hepworth had disappeared. They were in my care and I had deserted them—for my own interests. It was not the girl's fault; she had done her part innocently; the baseness of it was all mine.

When I finished I looked at Uncle Jason, expecting him to kick the cab door open and throw me out; I was ready to go without protest.

To my surprise he threw back his head and laughed immoderately, slapping both legs with vigor.

"Good!" he roared. "Ha, ha! serves her right! So she stood you up there to watch those old bargain counter presents, did she? Lady Hensington! Ha, ha!"

"Why, yes," I returned, deeply offended. "Isn't she an old friend of yours, and didn't you write and tell her to ask all the favors of me she wanted to ask and I'd do them for your sake? that is what Lady Marie Hensington gave me to understand."

"Nix!" yelled Uncle Jason, shouting with laughter. "And then, again, maybe I did! Anyway, you're a simpleton, Roman, and Lady Hensington is a sharp one. Ho, ho, when I knew her down on the farm, thirty years ago, I called her Mary Green."

CHAPTER XXXII

FLORENTINE DECIDES

I STILL looked dubious; even the fact that Uncle Jason knew Lady Hensington when she was Mary Green did not relieve me from the dark burst of cloud that was rolling toward me. "I've replaced the Hepworth," I observed, showing him the stone, the great Kohina, worth a king's ransom.

"Almighty!" he ejaculated, blinking at it.

"I shall tell Florentine about her cousin," I said abruptly switching the subject, "and I shall release her from her engagement."

Uncle Jason snorted.

"Just like your father. He paid his doctor the day before he died for fear they'd get fighting over his estate and not leave enough to pay the bills. You'll go up to Heaven some day in a fit of conscientious scruples."

But though he spoke brusquely, I saw in his firm face that he approved of my course; the girl should be told and released from her obligation.

"There's one thing more," I said thickly, and—though I don't know how I did it—I told him about Florentine's mother—of her life—the terrible photograph of her—and how the whole chain of Montana mining camps rang with her exploits.

"She is the most notorious woman in the States," I said.

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"Who said so?" demanded Uncle Jason.

"Sir Charles—he showed Florentine a picture that prostrated her."

Uncle Jason laughed.

"That reminds me of your Aunt Maria," he remarked, inspecting the toe of his boot with critical attention, "and the time she bought a crape veil for me. I was away two days, and when I got home I found her sick in bed and the dressmaker cutting out a black bombazine dress."

"What was the matter?" I asked.

"Oh, somebody told her I had been killed in a train smash-up—and she believed it."

"And it wasn't so?"

"Nit!" exclaimed Uncle Jason; "it was the man next door. So your Aunt Maria got up out of bed, paid the dressmaker and lent the crape veil to the woman next door whose husband did get smashed up. After that, whenever Aunt Maria got borrowing trouble I used to point to the box under the bed where she kept the crape veil. And it hushed her up."

There was a silence that could have been cut.

"Anything else?" inquired Uncle Jason jocularly.

"Yes, there is," I replied doggedly, for there was something in my uncle's receptivity to delight the heart of a man.

And then I repeated to him my ugly threat to kill Sir Charles and how I had found the bloody dagger in the woods only shortly afterwards.

"It's all circumstantial evidence," I admitted, "but it's pretty strong."

"Does Florentine know?" asked my uncle.

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"Yes," declared I, "and she is indignant——"

A burst of laughter greeted me.

"Ho! Ho! Ho!" roared Uncle Jason. "Just like your Aunt Maria again. She married me the day I was suspended—because she was indignant at the faculty. Now it's just like a woman to love a man all the more because he's going to get hung for murder."

Suddenly sobering, my uncle leaned toward me.

"Did you do it, my son?" he asked. "If you killed him, don't be afraid to tell me; I'm here, and we'll fight it out together; I'm only a little over sixty now, and I'll stay here and help you till Father Time draws the tape on me at the century mark."

"No!" I answered emphatically, "I did not lay finger on him except in a square fight!"

"Then shut up—and, remember, not a word of this to the ladies! Bless me, I'm wiping my eyes!"

We were near the house and Uncle Jason was evidently correct in assuming that the knowledge of the death of Sir Charles would not have reached Aunt Faith so soon, for as we turned the corner we saw the lights gleaming from all the panes, while darting shadows told us that the mansion was already in gala attire.

It was after seven o'clock when we alighted at the door, and Uncle Jason, always ready for dinner, was getting impatient.

We went up the steps; he quickly, I moodily, for I knew that I must forfeit my right to enter as a bridegroom.

But we were greeted in a way which, for a minute,

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upset even the robust calm of my Uncle Jason. At the head of the steps the door flew open to us and the doorman, usually a model of training, pulled us inside with a whisper to keep quiet.

Instantly Florentine appeared and beckoned us into the little reception room; her face was white, and dark shadows lay under her beautiful eyes. Uncle Jason and I stepped in after her. It was a critical moment for us all, but she read our faces and, before speaking, she knew that we already knew.

"A servant came from the Castle. She ran away, frightened at the murder, and came here. She was almost beside herself with terror. She saw him—it was murder—they tried to conceal the facts at first—for the sake of Aunt Hope and the others."

"And she told you—all?"

Florentine tried to speak, but it was difficult. Her cousin's life had been an unpleasant one, and for years she had scarcely known him. But the shock of it, the suddenness, the tragedy, had told upon the dear girl's already tired nerves. But it was evident that she did not associate the diamond with his death.

Florentine gave me an appealing glance. Uncle Jason saw it and slipped out into the hall; I looked at her and she at me.

"It is awful for us all—but I must bear it alone; it would be cruel to tell Aunt Faith now, when she is so happy—and it would do no good. Can we not wait, or is it all over now?"

There was something dubious in the last words, or, rather, in the tone in which they were spoken. I resolved to have the matter settled at once.

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"And now, Florentine," I asked, "what is it to be?"

"I suppose I ought to release you," she said, "since you were marrying me to save me from him. But it is so hard, and I am so—alone!"

"Do you mean it?" I asked.

Florentine began to cry, but her head was upon my shoulder and crying is a pleasant pastime for a woman when the man's shoulder is her own.

"I can't let you go," she sobbed.

"Neither can I," I exclaimed idiotically, "and I wouldn't if I could."

She suddenly smiled.

"Be careful not to alarm Aunt Faith," she cautioned; and then she would have slipped away, but I detained her.

"Florentine," I asked, "if a dark suspicion should be thrown upon me—you would not believe——" The words came hard. "You would not think me guilty of—anything?"

"Not even of murder!"

"Not even of—*murder?*" I repeated.

It was out at last.

"No!" she said sharply, and I saw that she understood. "Never!"

"You know that Sir Charles was killed—at almost the very hour I was waiting for you in the woods—and that—well! I had no cause to love him!"

"You didn't do it," she exclaimed, "and if you had you would have done it *to save me.*"

And then she darted away and was gone.

When I went out into the hall I found Uncle Jason still hanging up his coat. He was humming a love

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song, the chorus of which ran, "There's only one girl in the world for me."

And in the drawing-room door stood Irene, calm and confident; I felt surer all of a sudden.

"I love you, Cousin Irene," I declared, "and Florentine will love you too; you are such a comfort to us." I had stopped worrying for the moment.

"She already loves me," said Irene, "and she gave me these."

I followed Irene's practical forefinger until it rested upon the neck of her gown.

"She gave me her string of pearls; they're inside the neck of my dress. I prefer to wear them inside; they are safer and I don't intend to part with them—ever."

I told Irene that I was glad Florentine gave her the pearls.

"But why don't you wear them where they can be seen?"

"They're safer inside," decided Irene, "and I'm going to wear them there. The President of the Ladies' Club bought some pearls in Italy when she was on her wedding tour. She has worn them under the yoke of her dress for twenty years."

"Very well, Irene," I remarked, "wear them where you please."

Irene smiled the gratified smile of a woman who has proved her point.

"Now," cried she, taking me by the hand, girl fashion, "I want you to see the decorations; I don't believe you have noticed them yet. Come and take notice."

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I turned to Uncle Jason.

"You're all right, my boy," said he. "You're all right! She'd have married you if you had been walled up in a dungeon and she had had to go and break down the door."

I am rather glad she was not compelled to take any such strenuous action, I thought, as, impelled by Irene, I began to "take notice" of the drawing-room.

"The girl is a bargain," said Uncle Jason, "and I'll take her part against you any time, if you don't come up to her specifications—if you ain't the bargain package she thinks she's drawing—you tell her she can send me a wireless and I'll come and get her; that girl can be my niece any day."

But Irene had dragged me out of ear-shot. And now, my eyes were needed for the sights. The little house was, indeed, all rejoicing, for Irene had proved herself no inefficient hand at management, and an air of wedding festivity hung over the mansion. Even the wedding bell was present, for Irene, by some legerdemain, and with the aid of a near-by florist, had achieved a floral bell which for size and picturesqueness left nothing lacking. I wondered how Florentine and I would look standing under it, and how we should feel if it should fall. Irene read my fears.

"I built it on father's umbrella," she said, now fully recovered and delighted at an appreciative audience. "And it's as firm as Gibraltar. We covered the handle with lilies and hung a lily on each spoke. The top is partly green paper and partly roses. The florist didn't have enough green leaves to cover it."

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"Don't tell me any more, Irene," I replied. "Let my imagination play."

Her face fell.

"You are a wizard," I added, "and you've turned two prosy beings into Fairy King and Queen with your umbrella wand and your green paper."

Irene smiled as delightedly as a child with a toy.

"We are most ready now" she exclaimed, giving a lily a final nudge.

"Where's Mr. Pancoast?" I inquired. "I shall never feel sure of our nuptials until I see him on the spot, safe and sane."

A sigh was distinctly to be heard.

"He is in the reception-room across the hall," said Irene, "and I am afraid he heard you."

I looked over into the little room and there sat the Rev. Mr. Pancoast. Stepping across the hall I accosted him. He did not reply, and a shock went through me for he sat with his face buried in his hands, his shoulders shaking, and the tears trickling through his long thin fingers. I touched his arm and asked him what was the matter. He shook his head and I caught the words, "Man cometh up as a flower and is desperately wicked."

I thought of the orgy of the night before and a sympathetic feeling warmed me.

"Does your head ache?" I asked.

"It splits!" he replied.

"Cheer up," I urged, but his depression was of a kind that knows no sudden cheer; the gloom must wear off.

I turned and found Irene by my side.

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"Why didn't you ask them, Aunt Hope and Aunt Charity?" she inquired.

I briefly explained the matter to Irene, thus:

"This is practically an elopement," I declared, "only we preferred to elope to the house of Aunt Faith and have you and Uncle Jason among those present."

"That is the way one of the ladies of the Dorcas eloped," confided Irene, "and it was most satisfactory; saved all the bother and there were no wedding presents to be exchanged afterwards."

Here Irene produced a spray of myrtle which Florentine had sent down as a boutonniere for me; Irene fastened it on.

"I am pressing an orange blossom," said she, "for the Ladies' Club. They never saw a real orange blossom in Beverly; they always get married in paper ones."

And now, for miracles will happen even in these days, there was a step upon the staircase and we heard a dainty rustle. Irene looked and gave a cry of surprise and disapproval, but Uncle Jason and I spoke our delight.

For it was Florentine! And, of course, she shouldn't have been seen, for a bride should be invisible until the last moment. But there she was, all dressed in a wedding gown which had lain these years in Aunt Faith's treasure chest waiting for this day! I opened my mouth to speak. No sound came forth but I am free to confess that the blood flooded my face a joyful red. But Florentine had no eyes for me. She had a message for Uncle Jason and her lips were parted in an anticipatory smile that should

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have warmed his soul. In her hand Florentine held a red rose, and she extended it to Uncle Jason.

"Come and get it," she challenged him, standing on the bottom step of the stairs. "Aunt Faith sent it to you and she wants you to wear it."

Uncle Jason jumped as if electrified.

"Sure, I'll wear it," he exclaimed, "come here and pin it on me, Florry! Fix it so it looks nice!"

Florentine laughed as she came to him with the rose.

"I'd kiss you, Florry," he said, "but there's something on my mind."

"Plenty of time for that later," I observed.

"Don't be a fool, Roman, but listen to me; I forgot to tell you." Uncle began a narrative that for positive interest held me spellbound. Florentine, intent on pinning Aunt Faith's rose to his lapel, stopped and listened with the rose held suspended in mid-air.

Yet the communication was commonplace enough; certainly Uncle Jason had no idea of the tumult it created—the actual cataract of joy and contrition—in the hearts of Florentine and me.

I don't recall his words but they were to the effect that he had stopped around at my rooms to leave some packages, some wonderful bargains he had bought, and that while he was there, the manager, evidently much impressed by Uncle Jason's robust personality, judging from the narrative, had come out to interview him.

"They're all cut up," declared my Uncle, "about that affair of last night."

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"What affair?" I asked feebly for Florentine was listening, rose held aloft.

"That affair about the little actress—the girl they accidentally put in your rooms while you were away. They got her out early this morning but the management is all upset about it. They're charging you three times as much as the apartment is worth, and now, they're afraid you'll leave because they put that highflier of a girl in your room by mistake."

Uncle Jason paused. I looked at Florentine. The dear girl drew a long breath—was it a sigh of relief?—and began industriously pinning the rose.

"I told them," went on Uncle Jason, "that it was a damn shame, all right. Excuse my French, this time, Florry—you can't teach an old parrot to quit such language—and that I wouldn't blame you if you moved right out of their place. But I guessed, being that you were going to get married and felt amiable, that you'd excuse them this time, if they wouldn't let it happen again."

"Happen again!" I exclaimed sharply, "I should think not!"

Florentine gave a start of indignation and the pin slipped and went right through the coat and into her pretty thumb.

"Happen again," I repeated. "If they ever do let such a thing happen in my rooms again!" I ground my teeth.

Uncle Jason looked down at Florentine and caught the look of rebellion in her flashing eyes, also the flush of anger of her usually tranquil brow, and these signs,

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taken with the pricked finger, conveyed a clue to my uncle's nimble wits.

"That's what I told 'em, Roman! I said it was a damn—— Aunt Maria used to make me say 'darning needles'—shame to treat you that way. And I told 'em you never did care for little actresses, not even in your salad days, hey, my boy!"

A vigorous wink from my uncle accentuated this statement, and Florentine looking at him, and just missing the wink, gave him a glance of thanks. And now, the pin driven home by certain fingers held fast the stem of the rose and its glowing petals stood proudly in place upon Uncle Jason's lapel; a stunning red emblem sent to him from the depths of the appreciative heart of Aunt Faith.

"It will do!" said Florentine.

"It will do; fine," echoed Uncle Jason.

A tug at Florentine's gown recalled us all to the present. It was Irene, a more or less patient witness of that which, to her practical mind, seemed a waste of time and energy.

"If you intend to be married——" she wailed.

"I'm coming, Irene," said Florentine, and up the stairs they disappeared.

At that instant there was a sound at the door bell.

Could anything else have happened! What could come to disturb us at this hour? I opened the door myself. On the step outside stood a tall, well built, wiry looking man.

It was a messenger, a stern faced man who must speak to me at once. I conversed with him in an un-

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dertone and the import of his words was such that I deemed it expedient to accompany him.

Though the day had been one of ordeals I felt that the most trying of all was now to come!

"Anything wrong?" asked Uncle Jason anxiously as I hastily explained the situation while I flung on my coat.

"Yes, and no!" I replied; "delay matters a few minutes if you can. There is no alternative for me but to go."

"Go where?"

"It's her mother! She's here in London and she insists on seeing me."

I acted mechanically, as one who is stricken numb of sensation by dread. Florentine's mother, the woman who was the direct cause of so much misery to her, had sent for me. And her messenger was there waiting to take me.

"I'm coming," I said, keeping him outside until I could, after a few directions to Uncle Jason, join him.

CHAPTER XXXIII

AN INTERVIEW WITH HER MOTHER

THE door closed behind us shutting out the light and we groped our way down the steps wet with the fog.

In the street stood a splendid touring car, and, as I glanced at it, my guide uttered a curt:

"Get in!"

A ribald woman passed with a word on her lips and I shuddered; the horror—the dread of what was to come was upon me!

He followed me and closed the door giving no direction, but immediately the car started, going at rapid pace! My guide said no more but his assumption of authority irritated me.

"Who are you?" I asked.

He looked at me grimly:

"I am her brother," he replied.

"The brother of——"

"Of the Honorable Mrs. Hadley——"

"Whom we are going to see?" I persisted.

"Yes!" he said shortly and lapsed into silence.

He had taken the seat opposite me and I studied him. He was big and strong, well built of body and serious of expression, but his face looked to me ominously grim as I furtively stared at him. I noticed that his deep complexion and well developed hands were those

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of a man who has lived in the open. His dress, I was pleased to observe, was correct, and his voice, when he spoke, was that of a gentleman.

"Are we going far?" I queried impatiently, "for I am—I have an engagement—an urgent——"

"I know," he interrupted, "but it can wait; it will have to wait!"

As he spoke he threw open the motor door with a free and accustomed motion of his hand, and to my surprise, I saw that the car had stopped. We had not gone two squares, and we were halted in front of a house whose front windows almost commanded a view of Aunt Faith's domicile.

I stepped out and looked up; the building was a modern apartment of most exclusive air. The windows were richly but quietly curtained and at the door stood a lackey whose livery denoted the character of the house within.

Too surprised for words I followed my guide—whom I could not yet address by name—into the lift and up to the floor above. He walked through the wide and splendid hall, I following after in that daze of mystery and dread which a man feels when he is going to face the unfaceable.

"How had the woman obtained entrance to this house and what would she have to say to me!"

I braced myself for the ordeal, for my guide had flung open a door; at the same time he half pushed me in, and I found myself in a drawing-room which, though small in size, was of such richness that I could but note it. Yet, in spite of its splendor, there was an overnote of deep refinement.

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Too well, I knew that no place, however well guarded, could be sure of keeping its doorstep clean.

I stood inside the door, and as my eyes became accustomed to the light, I noticed, standing at one of the windows, a slight figure.

It was a lady; she was small and delicate; even against the window pane, I saw that she was willowy of build; her hair, which was combed softly back, was a silver grey and she wore a bonnet at the front of which gleamed a snow-white widow's ruche. She might not have been over forty but her widow's veil, her plain black gown and the simple white bands at her throat and wrist made her look much older.

She was almost within arm's reach of me yet she did not speak. Her face, which was of transparent whiteness, was turned away and I noticed that the hand which held her handkerchief to her lips was as delicate as the hand of an invalid.

I waited in some embarrassment.

She took a step toward me but did not extend her hand.

"Pardon me," she uttered softly, "but the occasion—the trial is almost more than my frail strength can endure."

I placed a chair for her and murmured something.

"You are Mr. Roman Elliott," said she, "and you are from Boston?"

"Yes, Madame!" I replied.

"I sent for you——"

Her voice was the feeble one of a sick woman, an invalid of numbered days, and to my fancy it seemed

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far away as though it had preceded its owner into a shadow land.

"I came to see Mrs. Hadley," I interrupted; "there is some mistake, madame!"

"I am Mrs. Hadley, the Honorable Mrs. Hadley," she continued with an effort,—“the mother of Florentine.”

"Madame!" I exclaimed rising and bowing, "let me pay you my respects—and congratulate you——"

"Do not," she answered, motioning me back to my seat. "The time is short and my strength is almost gone."

It seemed preposterous and I could not adjust myself to it.

I would have stopped her but with a gesture she begged to be allowed to proceed, and for the next ten minutes she held me spellbound, her brother standing guard in the background. Her speech, though rapid and at times incoherent, as she related her story, bespoke a woman who has lived a lifetime of ultra refinement,—weak, perhaps, wholly unassertive, yet a lady to her soul's core. Her accent, the broad vowels, her selection of words, all told of the woman who, through all her trouble, has preserved her moral tone, if not her self-assertiveness.

"It seems late to tell you what I must say," she resumed, "but I know you are about to marry my daughter and there are things that should be uttered. No," in answer to my unspoken word, "I will not go to her; it is better not. I am as dead." She coughed violently and a maid brought her a glass of water.

"It was not always with me as it is now," she con-

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tinued faintly; "when I was married it was with prospects as bright as those that now lie before my daughter. But they faded."

"Do not tell me now——"

She stopped me with a gesture.

"Florentine's father and I did not get on well. I was too timid, too shrinking, and I cowered from the life of London. I would not take my place in English society, and his sisters, who had looked forward to it, condemned me. I was to blame. But we drifted apart. I took my baby, and leaving my money behind me, I went home to Boston—that, too, is my native city! But I took care to guard the child's future by settling an annuity upon her; upon that she has lived.

"It is a strange time to tell you all this—but you see it was as sudden to me as it was to you."

Painfully she resumed.

"But her English relatives wanted her. I was allowed to keep her on condition that, at her father's death, I would send her back to England to be brought up by her aunts. I fought it bitterly but there were accusations brought and threats made. And, under the stress of it all, my health failed; at the same time Florentine's father died.

"While I was prostrated they brought the child back to England; it was a year before I knew it, for my condition was so feeble that I could hear nothing.

"When I could be moved my brother came for me and took me in his private car out to his home in Montana. It is a magnificent estate, high in mountains and secluded from the world so that

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tered there I recovered. But my spirit was gone. And even when my physical health improved, I continued to live the life of a recluse."

She stopped.

"But you will recover—you are better now!"

She shook her head with a sad smile.

"I shall be no better—ever," she replied. "But I knew that I could not die—nor live—unless I had seen the husband of my child—the man who is to take my daughter's happiness into his hands."

"I am afraid I cannot say much for myself," I responded, "except that I love her."

"It is enough—and to know that you are not marrying her for that foolish fortune—which she will never need."

"You are right," I returned humbly. "She will not need the fortune; I have already arranged for her to dispose of it—elsewhere—in any way she pleases."

My hostess did not hear me.

"I will not detain you longer," she said rising.

"But, surely, you are going to see Florentine."

Again she shook her head with the same sad smile.

"I am not able—it would be too much—I return at once. I cannot live in these altitudes, in the high mountain air of Montana perhaps, for a little while—"

"But we may come to see you——"

"Yes," she agreed hesitatingly, "but it is like lifting a chapter from the past. Oh, do not think," she added, her voice growing stronger, "that I have been forgetful of my daughter. Her governess was in my employ; her maid was my maid; twice a year her uncle has crossed to see her—all unknown to Florentine. The

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law—and my weak consent—foolishly took her from me but I never gave her up. It was only recently that I received word that they were going to force a marriage upon her before her twenty-first birthday.

“And, though I have not left my room a dozen times in as many years, I made a last effort for this journey. This apartment, as you see, was in readiness for me. My brother has kept it all these years in anticipation of just such a moment as this.”

She paused and bowed, slightly supporting herself with her hand on a chair back.

I thought that she did not know Sir Charles or had forgotten him and I mentally resolved that I would not disturb her by mentioning his name; but I was mistaken in thinking her uninformed.

“I fear my daughter has had much trouble with her Cousin Charles,” she said. “Poor fellow, I remember him as such an unfortunate—such an ill-tempered boy!”

I wanted to burst forth and tell her all, but delicacy forbade. This spirituelle creature whose heart had been broken years before could stand no agitation.

“I am not to tell Florentine?” I queried again for her manner and tone had all indicated that our conversation was to be preserved inviolate.

“Not yet—some time—perhaps—when you come
——”

She motioned me away, and I saw that I must go.

And so I left her standing there. She was like a wraith of memory, a delicate dream-woman, so ethereal that as I whizzed back in the automobile which waited for me at the door, I could hardly be-

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lieve that I had been conversing with a woman of flesh and blood.

But I had seen Florentine's mother and a great wave of thanksgiving rose within me. I longed to tell the dear girl, to tell Aunt Faith, Uncle Jason—everybody.

And even in my happiness I found room to anathematize Sir Charles!

At the portal of Aunt Faith's house Uncle Jason was waiting for me. He opened the door and, with a hearty shoulder grasp, he demanded:

"What news?"

"All's well!" I ejaculated so fervently that he gave me a double hand clasp.

"Thank God!" he said with another mighty grasp.

But now they are assembling in the drawing-room, and Mr. Pancoast, assisted to his feet by me, had struggled into his cassock and surplice, but his feelings were still of the most mournful. Reluctantly he donned the white satin neckpiece, insisting as he put it on, that man was prone to err, and that his experience of seventy-four years had only confirmed him in this opinion.

As we were putting on the final touches and were waiting for the bride—Irene wanted to play the "Lo-hengrin" but I begged her not to—there came a messenger with a note from Lady Hensington. She knew where I was for I had 'phoned her; also that I would replace the Hepworth. The note, on Lady Hensington's best stationery and in her most conciliatory tone, read:

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My dear Roman:

"I take the earliest opportunity to congratulate you on the return of the silver; your work as a detective was highly successful, and Scotland Yard is, I hear, anxious to secure your permanent services. The gold goblet was brought back this morning and the chest of silver followed. They found both at the address you gave them, but the man they call 'Johnny, the Australian Crook,' was not captured. You did a splendid piece of detective 'business,' as the man from Scotland Yard calls it; and now, please forgive me for any haste I may have shown or any impatience. It was more than kind of you to offer to replace the Hepworth, and you can bring the diamond to me here as soon as you have purchased it. I am really sorry you will have to expend so much money, but you understand my distressing position. My congratulations. Sometime you must explain it all to

"Yours ever gratefully,

"MARIE HENSINGTON."

"P.S.—Pardon my postscript, but I add a line to say that I am still heart-broken about the turquoise brooch. It seems that Johnny the Crook took it, but it was sold by a woman pal of his. It was a lovely pale blue turquoise, set in a white silver filigree setting, and it was, I should say, as big as an after-dinner coffee saucer or an American trade dollar."

I read the note through twice; then Irene tapped at the door and we hustled into the large drawing-room.

Of course Florentine was there. Perhaps it would be sufficient to say that she was there—and to stop, for from the minute she entered the room with Aunt Faith I had eyes for no one else, and I do not think that any one else had—except Uncle Jason, who stepped out of his place along the wall—out of the

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ranks so to speak—to pick up a red rose which Aunt Faith had dropped from her corsage.

And then, after a rustle and a stillness, the ceremony began. I heard with one ear, but with the other I listened for a ring at the door bell. I was “under suspicion,” as the bulletin had been read and bad news travels fast.

Mr. Pancoast is considerably over six feet tall, and as he towered above us in surplice and stole, we could have been excused for feeling awed; but what then was our dismay to hear the opening lines come rolling forth thus:

“Lord, let me know mine end, and the number of my days, that I may be certified how long I have to live. Man that is born of woman hath but a short time to live, and is full of misery.”

I glanced furtively at Florentine.

“My God, he is burying us alive!” I whispered.

“Hush!” softly said The-Lady-Who-Instructs-Me.

Mr. Pancoast discovering his mistake was thumbing back the leaves to the form of solemnization of matrimony, and soon we had the joy of hearing the familiar:

“Dearly beloved, we are gathered together here, in the sight of God, and in the face of this company, to join together this man and this woman in holy matrimony——”

It was a relief to us all. We were too happy to die, and we did want to be joined together in holy matrimony.

After the ceremony there were congratulations, and I have a mixed memory of being generally handed

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around and kissed. I was as wretched as so happy a man could be, but out of the confusion of sounds one incident remains quite distinct. Uncle Jason drew me aside.

"Do you see that turquoise brooch?" he asked.

"I see the beautiful diamond necklace you bought for Florentine," I said.

"Bother Florentine," was my uncle's unchivalric reply. "I mean the blue stone brooch Lady Faith has got on. It's in the front of that lace collar of hers."

I glanced at Aunt Faith and saw that which made me stare. Around her shoulders there was thrown a white lace scarf, and in the front the scarf was fastened with a big pale blue turquoise brooch set in a filigree frame. It was as big as an after-dinner coffee saucer, or an American trade dollar.

"I gave it to her," he exclaimed triumphantly.

"Where did you get it?" I asked.

Uncle Jason looked wise.

"I bought it of a lady on the street. The poor thing had lost her purse and couldn't get home. She was from Liverpool and had come to London for a few days' shopping and she needed the money. I was looking in a window at some brooches when she stopped me and told me the whole story. She said she would sell it at a bargain and I bought it. I tell you it's a beauty."

"What did she look like?" I inquired in sudden curiosity.

"Red hair, healthy pink cheeks, big handsome figure, long coat and veil; kept her face pretty well covered

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as she didn't want folks to see her selling her breast-pin," she said.

"Too bad," I murmured. "Did she say anything else?"

"No, she hurried away as soon as she got the money. I told her she could send me the money any time and I'd send her back the brooch, but she said no, she'd rather sell it outright."

"I'm sure she would," I declared emphatically.

CHAPTER XXXIV,

PRINCE AND PRINCESS CHARMING

“**N**OW, who’s going to take the bride out to supper?” asked Uncle Jason, which reminded me that we were still getting married.

“I think it is Lady Faith’s dinner hour,” I suggested, as I rejoined Florentine, who had moved from under the bell, but was being congratulated and wished much joy again and again by Irene, who does nothing by halves.

“Dinner is next on the program, I believe,” observed I, smiling at Florentine, “and, Mrs. Elliott, if I may have the pleasure——”

The clock struck.

“It’s just time for Aunt Faith’s dinner,” exclaimed Florentine. “It is the hour when she always looks for the arrival of her Prince Charming.”

“He has arrived!” I remarked.

We looked down the center of the drawing-room door just in time to see Uncle Jason making a low bow to Aunt Faith, a bow which was returned with a court courtesy. And then, before our astonished eyes, she linked her arm in that of Uncle Jason and they, too, swept through the drawing-room and into the dining-room beyond, leaving Florentine and Irene and me to follow as we pleased.

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Uncle Jason seated Aunt Faith at the head of the Feast Board—he had temporarily forgotten Florentine—then he stood at his own chair at the foot of the table, a seat he had usurped at once as his own, and looked around. But his gaze wandered back to Aunt Faith. A rose was in his buttonhole; he took it out and lifted it, extending it delightedly toward her. The dear old lady rose and courtesied and seated herself again with her hand resting on the roses in her corsage.

A waiter, all deaf and dumb after the manner of waiters, was passing down the table, filling the glasses with their sparkling bumpers.

"A health!" cried Uncle Jason. "A health—to all of us!"

He lifted his glass.

We all looked at Aunt Faith; her hand shook, but she raised hers.

"And to My Lady!" said Uncle Jason, making a bow at her that nearly overturned the table.

"I've been doing a little proposing of my own!" he declared, "while you and Florentine have been busy with your affairs."

His eyes wandered from the astonished face of Florentine to that of my own surprised but gratified countenance.

Then his glance rested upon his daughter Irene.

"What do you think of it, Irene?" he asked, and there was just a tinge of trepidation in his voice.

"Oh," said Irene, "I guessed it an hour ago and I wrote a letter home to Beverly telling the neighbors all

AN INTERVIEW WITH HER MOTHER

about it; but I thought I'd better not mail it until you set the day."

"Name the day!" exclaimed Uncle Jason, gleaming down the table at Aunt Faith.

"Hold!" interrupted I, "this is our wedding!"

There was a jangle at the door bell; Florentine and I both sprang to our feet. I started for the door, and with a remark that I would answer the bell I went out, closing all the doors after me.

As I opened the front door a burst of sound came in. The front stoop seemed filled with people. There were three men, and on the doorstep stood Lady Hensington.

"Pardon me!" she exclaimed, "but it was too good to keep."

She opened her cloak and took out a box; she unclasped it and a gleam shot out from a stone of heroic size. It was the Hepworth! Lady Hensington almost shrieked with excitement.

"We recovered it late this afternoon," she cried joyously. "They found Johnny, the Australian Crook, and he had it on his person."

"He was concealed in a hidden passage in the wall," interrupted a detective.

"And they got the Hepworth!" said Lady Hensington, "and you needn't replace it!"

"He's confessed, too," said the detective. "He murdered Sir Charles Hadley at Wentstone last night. Went up a stairway on the outside of the wall!"

"Incredible!" I ejaculated. But I was the only one present who knew how perfectly credible it was.

Well, I shook hands with them all and excused my-

THE STAIRWAY ON THE WALL

self as soon as possible, dismissing them rather unceremoniously.

Then I went back to my wedding feast, but I had a lighter heart than before.

Florentine, too nervous to sit quietly, had risen from her seat. I went straight to her and laid on her plate a black leather case.

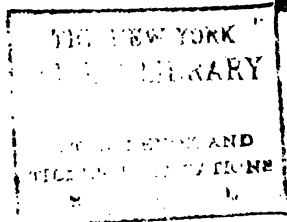
"It is the Kohina diamond," I said, "and it is a wedding gift. They've found the Hepworth!"

"Mrs. Elliott's health!" roared Uncle Jason. "And the health of—the diamond."

Everybody drank delightedly.

Florentine took the diamond and gave me one look, a look out of which fear for my safety and anxiety for my future had vanished,—a look in which understanding held rendezvous with understanding—and we knew now that the path of happiness lay broad and clear ahead.

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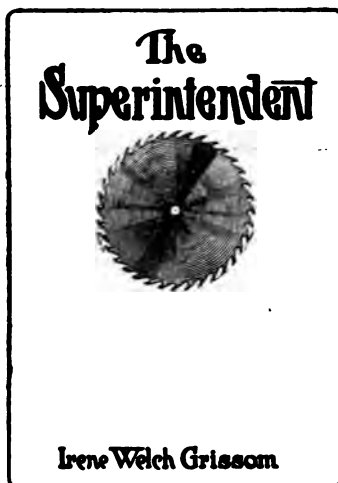
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